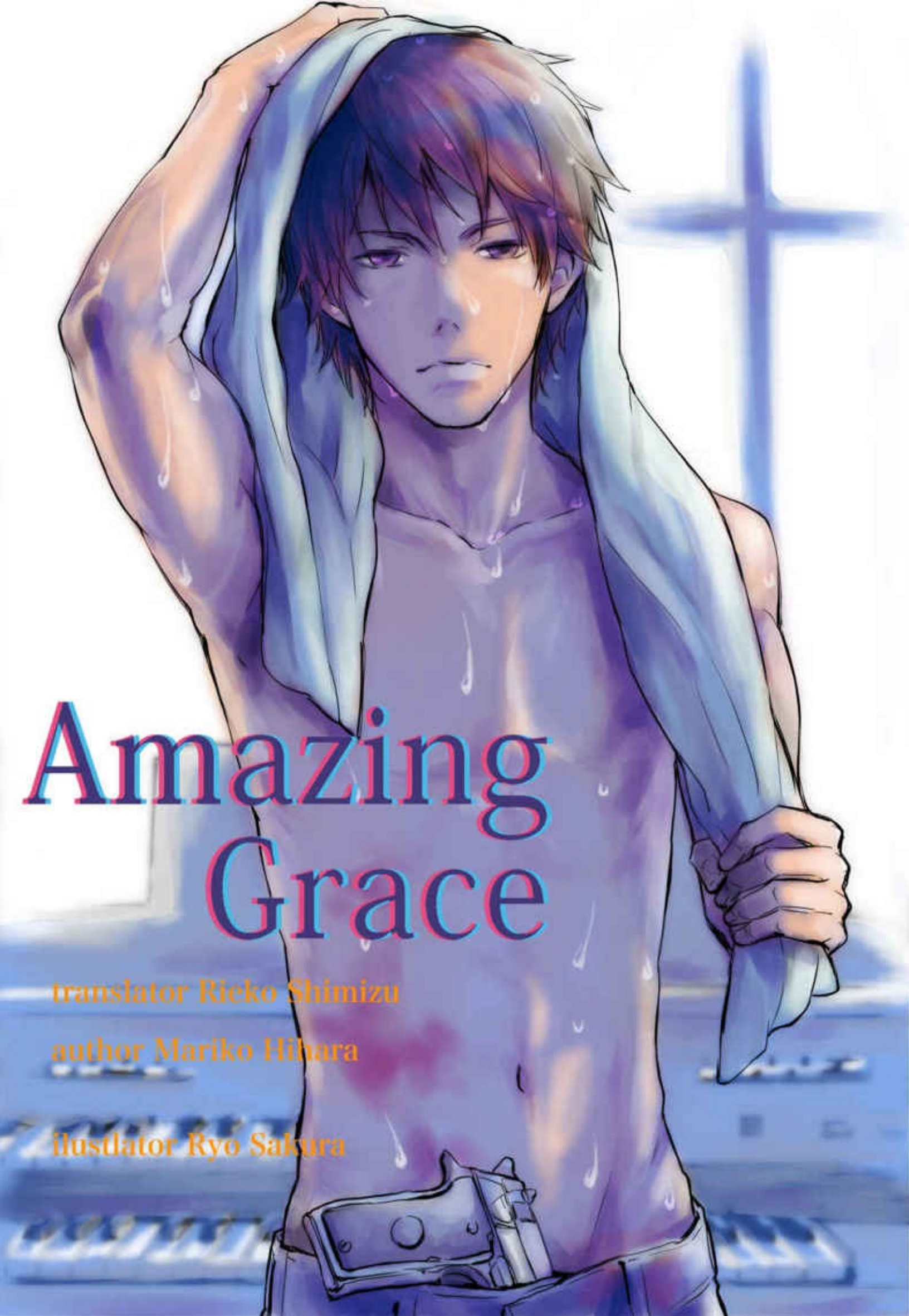




Amazing Grace

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Chapter 0

It's all a lie. I see no light. It's a deception.

If God really does exist, why am I going through this?

My life has no meaning.

So why didn't I end it and get it over with?

I had more than enough chances to.

It's easy to guess why I didn't.

I was afraid of dying.

If I died, everything would disappear. It would become nothing.

That's why he told me to believe in God.

Because we wouldn't have to be afraid as long as we believed that we were going to see God when we died.

But those are just pretty words. That guy gets on my nerves. He acts like he knows everything, even though he doesn't. And he says stupid things, like that he loves me.

I figured he was probably just looking for sex. I told him he could fuck me whenever he wanted. When I told him that, he held me close, and told me again that he loved me. He would love me in God's place, he said.

I hate him.

But whenever I hear that song being played on the church organ, the back of

my eyes start to sting.

Amazing grace how sweet the sound That saved a wretch like me.

I once was lost but now am found, Was blind but now I see.

Chapter 1

"What's wrong? What are you thinking about?"

Masatake Kuji responded to the question by shifting his gaze from the ceiling to the towering man on top of him. His angular jaw had a rugged sprinkling of stubble; the bridge of his nose was thick and bent, and beast-like eyes glittered from within deep sockets. Ruining his whole look was the head of tightly-permed hair that adorned his head like a cute cloud. Kuji always came close to laughing at the sight.

"Not much."

"Whatever."

The man deftly switched positions as he began thrusting into him from behind. The walls were thin in this cheap hotel in the outskirts of town. From the room next door, they could hear muffled moans and the sounds of a bed creaking.

Kuji pressed his face against the sheets and suppressed his voice. The man's hand reached for his groin and began to rub his half-flaccid penis.

"You're high maintenance, you know that?"

"Why don't you just go ahead and come, Nango?"

"Won't do," said Nango as he pumped harder. "I like that squeeze I get when you come."

"Pervert."

"I wouldn't be here doing this if I wasn't." The man's thick fingers rubbed the tip of his penis. It felt good even through a condom, as long as he was rubbed strongly enough.

"Nh...!" Kuji made a noise in his throat. It came out of his mouth as a pitiful-sounding squeak. Kuji was still throbbing from his climax, but the man gave him no time to recover as he continued to thrust ruthlessly in and out of him.

"You sound like a rabbit getting strangled," Nango mocked as he continued his piston-like motion.

"You've - strangled - a rabbit before?" Kuji asked, his breath coming out in gasps.

"Nope. I'm not that cruel. The only things that need strangling are pieces of shit like you."

Kuji came close to retorting, "So strangling a rabbit is cruel but strangling a person isn't?" But in the end, he decided against it. He knew that if he did, the man would only make him suffer more. Nango always engaged in the act as a form of punishment toward Kuji; he knew how much Kuji hated it.

Kuji felt his hips being pushed up higher. His chest, in turn, touched the sheets. He felt the tip of the man's shaft reach deep within him, and his own wilted penis took new life again. The condom, which had begun to come off, stuck again to his swollen member.

"There we go, that's the spirit. You're always better the second time around. Make me feel good, and I'll cut you some slack."

Depending on Nango's mood that day, Kuji ended up so sapped of energy that his vision swam yellow. Kuji focused his concentration on the pleasure, and flexed his anus along with the shaft moving inside of him.

Almost... there.

He squeezed his eyes shut, and a blinding light flared behind his eyelids. Kuji thought it looked a lot like the light that streamed in through the stained-glass windows.

He saw a human figure standing in the middle of the light.

Nango peeled off his condom and tossed it in the trash. He turned around to look at Kuji.

"How about this guy?"

Kuji was stretched out on the bed as he looked at the photos on a cell phone screen. Kuji and Nango met once a week in this gays-only hotel in the Shinjuku Nichome district. After they had sex, Nango would listen to what Kuji had to report to him. Right now, Kuji was being shown several mugshots.

"Never seen him," Kuji said, shaking his head, and threw the cell phone aside. Nango, who had been sitting naked at the table with a smoke, stretched his arm and caught the phone just in time.

"You idiot," he said angrily. Once he caught the phone, Nango gathered his scattered clothes from the floor and began briskly putting them on.

"Show me your phone," he said.

"It's in the pocket of my pants. Look for yourself."

Kuji had been told to photograph anyone that visited the church. Nango used his foot to tug at Kuji's pants on the floor. He rifled through the pockets while keeping his eyes on Kuji, who was still lying on the bed.

"Wow, Nango," he said sarcastically. "Are all of you Public Safety people

uptight like that?"

"You let your guard down for a split second, and it could cost you your life. You should be careful, too. If someone finds out that you're an S for us, you'll be tortured and killed."

Kuji was aware of that. But he continued to do this job, anyway. To live? No - perhaps it was to die, because he could not do so on his own. But he did not mention that.

"By whom?" he asked instead. "You think that priest would kill someone? This isn't like the cult I infiltrated last time. It's a proper Catholic church."

This time, it was Nango who did not answer. He removed the chip from the cell phone and inserted a new one. For a moment, his hard eyes softened, and harbored a strange glow.

"Masatake, we couldn't ask for a better S. We don't want to lose you."

"You mean lose the free sex, right?"

"That, too," Nango said, laughing. "The thing about you is that you don't have a presence. You blend right in, no matter where you go, and you don't linger in people's memories. You look like an average Joe, and that makes it easier for people to let their guard down. Your face is average, and you look effeminate enough not to provoke aggressive instincts in people. You're - how would I say it - an invisible man. Plus, you've got a good attitude. A lot of S's try too hard to impress us, and take things too far. That's when they end up blowing their cover."

Kuji felt no particular pride or accomplishment at being complimented for being a good S. A gopher for the police - a spy. The undercover term for it was S. But being told that he was an ideal spy wasn't exactly pleasant news to hear.

"Which means what? I'd win if I entered a pageant for spies?" Kuji said sarcastically as he sat up and crossed his legs. He stuck his index and middle finger together in a gesture, asking for a cigarette. Nango threw a box of Marlboros at him and stood up from his chair.

He walked up to Kuji, hooked a finger under his chin, and made him look up.

"Where is the subject going tomorrow?"

"Shinjuku Central Park. Going to a soup kitchen for the homeless."

"Emmaus?"

Kuji nodded.

Emmaus was an international support organization for the homeless and low-income earners. Song seemed to be working actively together with this group to support the homeless. He worked not only with Emmaus but with other non-profit organizations, as well.

"I want you to stay close to the subject, you hear?" Nango's fingers slid down to Kuji's slender throat and stopped over his thyroid cartilage. He leaned in as Kuji looked up at him.

"Your eyes are a strange color. But you look like any other guy as long as you keep your eyes down." His fingers clenched harder around his throat, and Kuji burst into a coughing fit.

"Don't give the subject any sympathy. I know exactly what's going on in your head."

Kuji's breath whistled through his constricted throat. The man's set of fingers eventually let go of him.

Nango approached the door, paying heed to any presence outside. A set of

footsteps passed.

"See you next week." With that, Nango slipped through the narrow gap of the half-open door. Kuji settled back into his seat on the bed and took his time smoking his cigarette. He was supposed to let some time pass before leaving the hotel after Nango.

Halfway through his second cigarette, Kuji began to hear a strange sound coming from the back of his throat. It was the same, strained voice he made when Nango had pressed down on his thyroid cartilage. It took him a few seconds to realize that he was crying.

Yes, when this heart and flesh shall fail,

And mortal life shall cease,

I shall possess within the veil

A life of joy and peace.

That day would never come - because I'm an S.

Kuji thought of the man whom he envisioned whenever he climaxed. Song Jin-II - his surveillance subject.

Chapter 2

Anapana Sati. It apparently meant "mindful breathing."

Nango's first assignment for him was to infiltrate a cult called Anapana Sati. It all happened one night, three years ago.

"Take one down."

That was what he was told that night, as Kuji and another lowly gopher were handed Makarovs.

Just the day before, one of the top brass in the Black Dragon Society had been shot by a member of the Ai Lan Company gang. The man had dropped by the entertainment district to collect protection money from the businesses in his territory. He had been sitting in his Toyota Celsior, counting bills, when he had been shot by a drive-by motorcycle.

A few hours later, bullets were fired into a number of Ai Lan Company offices. But a spat between gangs often did not end there. An eye for an eye - the books were balanced in blood. Those were the rules in gang society.

"I don't care who you take. Masa, you'd probably only get four years at best. Serve your time."

When you were told that in a gang, you had no choice but to go.

Kuji and the other gopher had been waiting to spring an ambush when they had been taken aside for routine questioning by a patrolling police officer. As a result, they were hauled in for violating the Sword and Firearms Control Law.

Kuji was taken to a separate police station. There, he was told to become an S. He was also told that he had no choice.

"An S? And what sort of information do you think I'd be able to glean about the Black Dragon Society?" Kuji had asked in the interrogation room. The Organized Crime detective had burst into laughter.

"We already know exactly what goes on inside those gangs. We don't need to hire an S to check things out. We scratch each other's backs. You should know this - you're one of them."

The detective was right. Kuji frequently heard from the second-in-command if there was a planned raid that night - of course, through an insider's tip. The police were satisfied as long as they could make a decent catch of criminals, and they backed off once they did.

And every time, the gang handed over a few guns. That was how they maintained their give-and-take relationship with those in Organized Crime.

"Public Safety wants you," the detective had told him. "No one knows what they're up to. They told us to give them someone, anyone - that they could use as an S. That was all we were told."

"What happens if I refuse?"

"Ask them," the Organized Crime detective had replied, saying nothing more.

Kuji was then taken to the Tokyo Detention Center, where he met Nango for the first time.

"Masatake Kuji," the man had begun. "Put into a juvenile detention center when you stabbed your father at age seventeen. Spent three years there. After getting out on parole, you were invited by a friend from prison and joined the Black Dragon Society."

Nango's research was surprisingly accurate. Even the smallest details of his time in juvenile were written in that report.

"What if I say no?"

"No one in this country stands a chance if they try to rebel against the state. I can get you hauled in for any crime. Violation of the Sword and Firearms Control Law. Obstruction of justice. Violent assault. Violation of the Road Traffic Law. Et cetera, et cetera. If the prosecutor's office files charges, there's a 90% chance that you'll be found guilty. Feel like going to prison again?"

"I'm not afraid of prison."

But Kuji still remembered the unmentionably heinous abuse and humiliation he had endured at the juvenile detention center.

"You know easily the prosecution's demand for a sentence can change," Nango continued. "The nation can keep you in jail for as long as they like. And a word from me will have you sent into the worst cell out of them. The warden, the inmates - they'll all do what I say and torture you. You also won't get any parole. Oh, and that's not it," he continued.

"Your mother is remarried, correct? Your younger sister and brother are with her. Your little brother is in twelfth grade. He's looking for somewhere to work after he graduates. Your little sister has a boyfriend. What do you think is gonna happen when they find out their big brother is in prison serving time because he's in a gang?"

Kuji suddenly understood. It hadn't started that night, after all; it had started the moment he had been born, and all this time he had paved the path that led him here.

Shiro Nango belonged to the second division of the Public Safety Foreign

Affairs department, or the Sotoni for short.

"What's *sotoni*?"

That had been Kuji's first and final question.

"Short form for Foreign Affairs Second Division," Nango had said. "We deal with Russia and Asia; let's just put it that way. You should be proud, you hear? You're doing good for your homeland."

You must be fucking with me. A country like this deserves to wither and die, Kuji thought, but of course, he did not say so out loud.

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Kuji continued to walk through the late-night streets of Roppongi.

The roads were overflowing with people. It seemed particularly so once the winter bonuses had been paid out. It seemed even more crowded than in the daytime. Like Shinjuku, this town did not sleep.

Kuji turned at the intersection toward Iikura. The Tokyo Tower, lit up bright red, steadily loomed closer. He turned off the main road into a residential neighborhood, and walked past a luxury condominium to enter the grounds of an antiquated Western-style mansion. It was like any regular residence, save for the small cross nailed to the gatepost. The main entrance was left open twenty-four hours a day; however, Kuji went around to the back of the house. The back door led straight into a small kitchen. Kuji pulled off his leather jumper in the dark.

He turned the faucet, brought his lips to it, and drank until his stomach began

to rumble in protest. He squatted on the kitchen floor and furtively sneaked his hand down the front of his pants.

"Damn it... damn it..." he cursed to himself.

Kuji was given a surprisingly light sentence for violating the Sword and Firearms Control Law. He would only spend one year and three months in actual incarceration, and during that period, he was given astonishingly preferential treatment. For the first three months, he was assigned to be the laundry boy, who collected the dirty clothes of all of the inmates and distributed them back after they had been laundered. Next, he was assigned to take care of the mail - in charge, again, of collecting them from inmates. Next, he was a proofreader for a printing factory. He experienced no harassment from the wardens, nor any rape from inmates, as he had experienced in juvenile.

It was clear that Nango had pulled some strings. But this also meant that if he retaliated, Kuji could easily be taken out of his cushy environment and thrown into the pits of hell.

When Kuji was let out on parole, the probation officer who came to pick him up was a middleman between him and Public Safety.

Arrangements had already been made with the Black Dragon Society and Ai Lan Company for Kuji. No one would be suspicious if a throwaway pawn like him didn't return. And by inserting the probation officer between Kuji and Public Safety, it made things harder for both gangs to get in touch with him.

In other words, Kuji had been submerged into the underground world - into a darkness deeper than that of yakuza society.

The probation officer took Kuji to a facility, where he stayed for six months

receiving training to become a spy. That was where he was also routinely raped by Nango.

"You're my S, and I'll make sure your body knows that. I'll drive it into your every cell so that you can never say no to me."

Sex with other males in prison was already enough to make Kuji nauseous; not only did Nango engage in it, he also taught Kuji what pleasure was for the first time.

In the beginning, he was drugged. Eventually, though, he began to ejaculate solely from being stimulated anally.

It was a hellish pleasure. Kuji felt humiliated every time he was brought to climax without a choice. He had only been able to bear sex in prison by steeling himself against the pain. It was better if it was painful - because pain would eventually end. If he lost consciousness from the pain, it was over even quicker. And if he didn't pass out, it was proof that it wasn't painful enough.

But there was no end to pleasure. His body kept asking for more and more.

"Damnit," Kuji growled under his breath as he continued to pump his flaccid member. *I won't let him be the last one to make me come.* His last time had to be on his own means, of his own will.

"Ah, ah-ah...!" Kuji let out fragmented moans as he caught the hot liquid in his hand. His nostrils quivered at the raw smell that stung them.

"Hah...." Kuji let out a breath before zipping up his fly and lying belly-down on the floor.

He wiped his wet fingers on his jeans. The thudding of his heartbeat gradually quieted down. Then, he heard the faint strains of an organ. He thought it was strange to hear playing at night.

Past the front entrance of the church, there was a hall which was used as the chapel. Although it was adequately sound-proofed so as not to disturb the rest of the residential neighborhood, it was nonetheless uncommon to hear the organ played at early-morning and late-night masses.

The chapel was accessible from the living quarters through a side door, but since it was right next to the altar, Kuji instead went outside again through the back door. He went around to the front entrance and opened the door to the hall. He was met with a sight of bright, shimmering lights.

A man in priest's robes was playing the organ. There was a couple sitting in the pew at the very front.

Song. Kuji called out the man's name in his head. The organ stopped as if the player had heard him.

"You've come at just the right time," said Reverend Song, his back still turned. His voice was low and soft. He then stood up and turned around, showing his impeccably-proportioned face as he looked at Kuji. He beckoned with his large palm.

"These two would like to hold a wedding ceremony, but they don't have the time to come in and listen to my sermons. That's why I've been holding them at night especially for them. Masatake, will you play for me?"

The man in the couple clearly looked like he was of South American descent. The woman was Japanese, and looked like she worked in the liquor and entertainment business. She was wearing a spaghetti-strap dress which revealed a generously-fleshed back, and she was wearing a shawl over it. When Kuji slipped past the couple, he caught a glimpse of her voluptuous cleavage.

He sat down in front of the organ in Song's stead. He began to play slowly.

Song stood in front of the couple with the Bible in hand.

Her boobs are in plain view from where Song's standing - the moment the thought crossed his mind, Kuji felt hatred bloom in his heart toward the woman. He desperately subdued it while he let his fingers dance over the keys.

"Today, we will start by reading about the epistles to the Thessalonians. If you could turn to page-"

The sermon and hymn in unison was itself over in about fifteen minutes.

"Will you come tomorrow night, as well?" Song asked the couple.

"Yes, Father."

"Then, I will hold the third sermon tomorrow night. After that, let us decide on a date for your ceremony."

The man and woman kneeled before Song and kissed his hand. They bowed deeply before leaving through the door. Song followed them and saw them out at the entrance, then came back and approached Kuji.

"Welcome back," Song said. His thick eyebrow gave a slight twitch. Kuji did not miss it. He lifted his hand, which he had wiped on his jeans just moments before, and brought it to his nose.

"Do I smell? I wiped it off, though. I don't think any of it got on the keys."

Song sighed and peered into Kuji's eyes.

"Masatake, I'm not criticizing you for it. I'm not going to tell a young man like you to do as I do. I just hope that someday you'll find happiness like that couple has done."

Kuji sniffed derisively and wiped the organ keys with his handkerchief. The discord that sounded from the organ was jarring.

"Don't you think they're suspicious, coming out in the middle of the night like that? Besides, aren't you afraid for your safety at all? I don't know what you're thinking, leaving your door unlocked every hour of the day."

"People wouldn't be able to come in if I locked my door. That's how you came in that day, Masatake."

I already knew it would be unlocked.

That night, I made it seem like I'd sought cover because I was running from the gang. But it was all an act. Why can't you even see through that? I thought your God was supposed to be almighty.

Kuji internally hurled the words at Song, whose back was now turned as he walked toward the altar. Song blew out the candles that had been lit there.

"Come on over. I'll make you a cup of coffee," he said. They left the chapel through the small side door beneath the altar and exited into the hallway.

They entered the kitchen, where Song put the coffee maker on. Soon, a fragrant aroma filled the air. Song handed Kuji a mug of coffee, which he drank standing up while leaning against the wall. He watched Song sit at the table and put milk in his own cup.

"Why do you make them come for three days? To make sure it's not a fraudulent marriage to get a visa?"

"No," Song said as he smiled up at Kuji. "In Catholicism, when you swear upon your love before God, it is eternal. That means you have to be very careful in going through with it. I recommend people to come three times so that they can turn back if their hearts are unsure. Peter said three times that he did not know Christ. But even then, Christ still forgave him."

Kuji sniffed in derision again and took his empty mug to the sink. Song spoke

up behind him.

"Masatake, what are you doing tomorrow? Well, today, to be more exact."

"I'll go with you. Manual labor is the least I could do to pay for my meal. I'd offer sex, but you always say no. You're such a hassle."

Song laughed softly. His voice went straight to Kuji's groin, and he came close to letting out a groan.

"Masatake, we're leaving at nine-thirty. People from the NPO will come to fetch us. You should catch some sleep until then."

"You, too," Kuji managed to squeeze out before he hastily went to go outside. He climbed the set of stairs in front of him, which led him to the living quarters on the second floor. Kuji stepped into the small room that he had to himself. He climbed into bed and squeezed his eyes shut.

That voice, the sound of the organ. Song had occupied a place in Kuji's heart ever since they first met that day. And Public Safety knew very well that he did.

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Consolation visits to the juvenile detention center were one-sided displays of goodwill that inmates found difficult to appreciate. Whatever the superficial do-gooders said sounded vacant and meaningless to people who knew that at the end of the day, they were still trapped within the walls of their prison. People of religion always mentioned words like love, friendship, loyalty, and gratitude - words that sounded sickeningly fake. But inmates still had to bow their heads and listen, for fear of making a bad impression on the prison guards.

In fact, just today a priest from some church had brought along a group of such visitors and given a lengthy and tiresome sermon. But Kuji appreciated the chocolate and cake that they had brought in; inmates were always starved for sweets. The amateur band that they had provided as entertainment hadn't been half-bad, either. The priest was open-minded; instead of a lineup of gloomy religious hymns, the band had played pop tunes like the Beatles, Bob Dylan, and even Peter, Paul and Mary; and the Carpenters. Kuji hadn't known who the artists were at the time, but he thought they were better than religious hymns.

He had been assigned as a janitor at the time, and was mopping the floor alone in the vacant hall after the modest concert and meal had ended. That was when someone had come in.

The person sat at the facility's piano and had begun to play. A soft singing voice carried a melody that was more beautiful than any he had ever heard.

Amazing grace how sweet the sound

That saved a wretch like me.

I once was lost but now am found,

Was blind but now I see.

When he came to, Kuji found himself standing beside the player, not even attempting to wipe the tears flowing from his eyes.

The man playing the piano had a tall stature and was wearing jeans and a black shirt with a mandarin collar. Kuji remembered him playing the keyboard in the amateur band.

His facial structure was European, with his high nose and chiseled features, but his tapered eyes and black hair made him look more Japanese.

The man directed a gentle gaze at Kuji when he approached.

"It's a beautiful song, isn't it?" he said. "Would you like to try playing, too?"

"I've... never played before."

"It's an easy melody. Let me teach you."

Before Kuji knew it, he was sitting on the bench and following the man's directions as he pressed each key on the piano.

"Are you sure you've never played before?" came the man's surprised voice from above.

"Yeah."

"I don't believe it. You must have a born talent for it, then. Your left hand is keeping up well, too."

"Father," called a prison guard's voice, interrupting their time alone together.

At those words, Kuji learned for the first time that the man in front of him was a priest.

"This boy has musical talent," the priest said. "Education is one of the important purposes of this facility, isn't it? I'll come here regularly to teach him."

That had been Kuji's first encounter with Song.

Kuji absorbed music like dry sand absorbing water. He learned not only hymns and classical pieces, but also pop songs. Juvenile detention centers encouraged inmates to acquire skills and qualifications more than adult prisons, which made it easier for Kuji to get permission to receive lessons.

"When you finish serving your sentence, come to me," Song told him at every opportunity.

Then, one day, Song's visits stopped. He had been put in charge of a different diocese, and he said that he could no longer take the time to visit the detention center. It was bound to happen, Kuji told himself. He had been an idiot for believing in the man. He told himself that he would probably never see Song again.

"Your next subject is someone you know," Nango had told him after Kuji's infiltration mission with the cult was complete. Kuji realized that he had already been marked as a potential spy candidate by Public Safety even while he was still in juvenile. That was why he had been given permission so easily to receive music lessons - it had all been part of the plan.

This was perhaps the first time that Kuji caved in to Nango.

He did what he was told and visited Song that day. Although eight years had passed, Song appeared unchanged. He had the same masculine allure and nimble movements that hinted at his physical fitness. These features, unusual for a priest, were also part of the reason why Kuji had been surprised when he found out that Song was one.

"I was wondering if you would ever visit me," Song told him. "I felt bad about the way I had to leave you. Maybe we met again by chance, but I think it's what God intended."

When Kuji appeared before Song that day, battered by Nango in a form of disguise, Song had taken him to a nearby night clinic. At the clinic he met a doctor with a pretty face and a man with a sturdy build who looked like his bodyguard. There, he received treatment.

"If you're being chased by a gang, you should take cover here for a while," Song had told him. He had lapped up every word of the lie that Nango had fabricated, and agreed to take Kuji in. He had allowed Kuji to live in the church.

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Slender, supple fingers danced over the keys.

"I would say, if anything was eye-catching about you, it would be your fingers," Nango had said on several occasions. Kuji had no idea if it was true. But he was thankful that he could move his fingers freely and for the ease with which he was able to weave a melody.

Haydn's *The Seven Last Words of our Savior on the Cross* was a sorrowful melody. Although the piece was made for strings, Song had arranged it to be played on the organ.

The introduction in adagio had a dramatic melody that foreshadowed tragedy. The sonata that followed was, for some reason, a bright largo. The third movement depicted words to Barabbas, and was also a breezy and light melody. Kuji sensed a presence standing beside him and gave a sidelong glance.

"You must like this piece," Song said.

"Yeah. It's the second song I learned from you after *Amazing Grace*."

"You have a good memory."

Kuji did not answer as he kept playing. He enjoyed the times they spent like this. It was the only contact that he and Song could have.

What else could he do, as a church organ player who did not believe the

words of God?

After he finished playing the third movement, Kuji closed the lid of the organ.

"It's almost time, isn't it?"

Song nodded as he unfolded the coat he had been holding and draped it over the shoulders of his priest's robes.

"As much as I'd like to sit and listen for a bit longer, it's almost time."

Kuji followed Song into the pantry below the stairs. He carried the stacked cardboard boxes there to the entrance of the house. The boxes contained blankets, underwear, and socks that had been donated by members of the parish.

A small truck could already be heard beeping its warning signal as it backed in through the gates. A man with a slender build was sitting on the loading bed of the truck. He leapt off nimbly to take the cardboard box from Song. He beckoned to Kuji with a jerk of his chin.

"Get up on there and take the box from me."

Kuji disliked this man. He was the NPO's representative, and his name was Nosaka. He always looked at Kuji with suspicion. After the first time they'd met, he had gone to Song and warned him not to "let such a shady-looking guy in."

Kuji gave a sniff and ignored Nosaka, going around the truck to the passenger side. He opened the door and turned to Song.

"Song, get on. We'll do the rest. Right, Mr. Nosaka?"

Faced with no choice to refuse, Nosaka clicked his tongue irritably and hoisted the cardboard box onto the loading bed.

"Get up onto the loading bed," Nosaka repeated, in a stubborn attempt to resist

giving Kuji the reins.

"You get up there," Kuji said.

"What?" Nosaka scowled, his temper rising.

"I'm younger than you," Kuji continued. "You don't want to throw out your back, do you?"

Nosaka remained hesitant until a female voice called from the driver's seat.

"He's right, you know."

Kuji looked in surprise at the driver's seat to see a large South Asian woman with dark skin leaning out of her seat. She was wearing an alpaca wool sweater with snug-fitting jeans, her glossy black hair coming down to her shoulders. Kuji had never seen her before.

"Fine." Nosaka climbed back up onto the loading bed. "All right, keep them coming."

Chapter 3

In the winter, the default menu for the makeshift soup kitchen was a hearty *miso*-based soup with root vegetables, called *kenchinjiru*, which was served along with a salted rice ball.

Winters had become especially harsh for the homeless after convenience stores had begun locking their waste bins. Fortunately, there were many support organizations in the capital of Tokyo which the homeless could turn to. Therefore it was no surprise that many chose to head into the big city.

Global warming was also good news for these people; although the breeze was still biting cold, some degree of comfort graced their faces as they loitered in the sun on a warm winter day.

While NPO members doled out food in disposable paper dishes, Kuji sorted blankets and underwear a distance away. Song was also seen in the organization's tent, talking to an elderly homeless person and rubbing his back. It was Song's job to examine the homeless' physical conditions and provide them with medicine if necessary. There was also an older female nurse who took their blood pressure when it was needed.

Kuji discreetly but firmly kept his eyes locked on Song as he sorted through clothing. He watched for who would approach him, who would talk to him. He had to report all of this information to Nango - that was why he was situated here, with a clear view of the man. At least that was what he told himself.

No, it's not. He knew it wasn't. The fact left a bitter taste in his mouth. The

dark-haired woman who had been sitting in the driver's seat was leaning in towards Song. Her large stature balanced out well with Song's own towering height. You could say they looked like a good couple.

Although Song was in a religious occupation, Kuji found it hard to believe that he wouldn't be interested in women. Song only refused to have relations with Kuji because he wasn't interested in men. If that was the case, the man could vow celibacy all he wanted, but there was no doubt that he probably felt sexual desire for women. Song would probably never actually engage in the act with a woman, but just the idea of him feeling desire for one was hard for Kuji to bear.

He could still let it pass if a woman approached Song in church. But outside of the church, all of Kuji's restraint went out the window. The hatred he felt for all the women who approached Song inevitably showed in his face.

That was his biggest reason for distancing himself from Song in these situations.

Just then, Kuji spotted an unfamiliar man approaching the tent. He was wearing a half-length coat and jeans, with brown hair and an ear piercing. He was rather plump, with small eyes and full lips. He looked no older than thirty.

The man was bowing to Song and the members of the NPO and speaking to them. Kuji nonchalantly edged closer.

"...Yes, I was a homeless person myself once. Even before they coined the term 'Internet cafe refugees'."

The man pulled out his business cards from his inside pocket and began handing them out.

Doesn't seem like anyone suspicious, Kuji thought. No spy would go around

handing out business cards. He read the card that was handed to him. It was printed with the words, "Kiyoshi Morimoto, Asylum Net."

"Asylum, as in a place of refuge," explained Morimoto. "My job is to help young people who go from Internet cafe to Internet cafe with no permanent place to stay. In other words, I run a youth shelter, you might say."

Morimoto spoke with fervor.

“Cycling through short-term stays at Internet cafes is a very inefficient way of living, and there's no escape from that vicious cycle. [*Outpost village*](#)* aren't available all-year round, either.”

Nosaka, the NPO representative, looked at Morimoto suspiciously.

"You're not in the welfare business, are you?" he asked.

There had been an increase of businesses which provided living spaces to the homeless and applied for welfare payments on their behalf. This was because one could not receive welfare unless he had a resident's card at a registered address.

"Of course not," Morimoto said. "I only want to help young people who are willing to work. Just having a fixed address goes a long way toward finding a job. If only they would choose to stay at our facility, for an amount less than a month's stay at an Internet cafe..."

Song interrupted Morimoto quietly.

"Mr. Morimoto, I understand your aspiration. And I presume you've come here today to help with our volunteer work?"

Morimoto flashed an amiable smile in Song's direction.

"Of course I've come to help. But I'd also like to ask for permission to give my

business card to those here who are willing to work. I'm sure you folks in the NPO mean good in what you do. But you must admit your help doesn't get to the root of the problem, does it?"

Nosaka looked offended.

"On the other hand," Morimoto continued, "I can help those people who want a way out of these horrendous conditions. Only people who have the will, of course. Without a will to work, there's no going anywhere."

Song smiled serenely.

"You're absolutely right, Mr. Morimoto. How wonderful it would be if you could help these young people stand on their own feet. We will help those who either don't have the will to work or cannot work even if they want to - like the elderly or the sick."

"Hey," Nosaka butted in, but Song pulled him back by the arm.

"Song..."

Song nodded to Morimoto in assent.

"I'm glad to have someone on the same wavelength," said Morimoto. "Take care, then."

Kuji watched as Morimoto turned his back and walked away. Meanwhile, Nosaka was busy attacking Song.

"These days, long-term care and welfare are all about business. I'll bet anything that a shady-looking guy like him is in it for the money."

"You can't survive in this country if you're going to shut business out, Mr. Nosaka. You have to give permission to people like Morimoto in order to see what he's truly like. If he was really 'shady', as you say, he would do it

regardless of whether he had permission or not. We're better off letting him do what he wants under our watch."

"I guess that's one way to look at it," Nosaka mumbled in a disgruntled way as he caved in. He noticed Kuji, who had edged closer to listen.

"Perfect," he said. "Why don't you tail that guy and keep an eye on what he's doing?"

"Why me?" Kuji protested.

"You're closer to him in age - you'd probably get along. Try chatting him up and see what he's trying to get up to."

You kidding me? Are you telling me that I have to be Nosaka's spy, too?

"No," said Kuji flatly.

"What did you say?" Nosaka said sharply. Song stepped in again to intervene.

"Masatake, Mr. Nosaka is right. Do you think you can keep an eye on Mr. Morimoto, just for today? If something happens, we at the camp will have to take responsibility."

Kuji lowered his eyes slightly as he looked at Song, and nodded.

"I'll do it if you say so."

Nosaka gave an exaggerated shrug and walked back toward the cooking pots.

"I'm sorry, Masatake," Song said as he looked down at him. The man peered into his eyes. Kuji squirmed. He felt uncomfortable having Song in such close proximity outside of the church.

"It's nothing. I just have to talk to him, right?"

Kuji set off immediately after Morimoto and caught him conversing with a

young backpacker. The weary young man had seated himself on the stainless-steel fencing around the hedges and was eating his bowl of soup. His clothing looked as worn as his face, but he wasn't as dirty as a homeless person.

Kuji reckoned that the man must be what they called an "Internet cafe refugee".

Morimoto apparently thought so, as well, as he began trying to convince the man to come to his shelter.

"You'll get unlimited use of a VoIP phone. What kind of phone do you use, anyway? Prepaid? You must pay quite a bit per month, huh? Disposable, like your button-down shirt and underwear?"

"Well, I can't enter a contract if I don't have a fixed address, so..."

"If you keep on wasting money like that, you'll never be able to accumulate any savings, and you'll never be able to afford a room to rent. You want to keep going down that spiral and become homeless? You might be managing now, while you still have the energy, but would you be able to continue that for fifteen years down the road?"

"I don't plan on doing this for that long, anyway."

"You know what they call that? Unfounded confidence."

Morimoto then handed a business card to the young man.

"You can blame looser regulations, or maybe it's the new global standard. But either way, disparity between the rich and the poor is only going to get wider in Japan. You have to protect yourself."

The young man nodded and took out his cell phone from his bag. The two of them exchanged phone numbers.

Morimoto eventually parted ways from the young man and set off into a walk. He noticed Kuji and raised his hand in greeting.

"Hey, there," he said. "What's up?"

"Um, I was wondering... can I go to see your place sometime?"

"Sure. But I thought you were friends with that group over there?"

Kuji caught up to Morimoto and stepped in line with him. "No. I'm more like... what would you call it... a NEET? I help out when I can, but mostly I just hang around."

"Uh-huh," said Morimoto as he stopped and looked at him. "You've never done any work before?"

"Part-time work at a convenience store, but that's about it."

"And do you have the will to do anything?"

"I dunno."

Morimoto burst into loud laughter. "I guess you wouldn't. You're a NEET." He appeared to have let his guard down completely as he gave Kuji a good-natured clap on the shoulder.

"All right," he said. "Come on over. You're free to take a look if you want."

Kuji finally knew why Nango had called him an ideal S.

The soup kitchen finished its distribution past three o'clock in the afternoon. The group then took up a table at a family restaurant for what they called a "wrap-up meeting", which was, in other words, just a coffee break. The dark-

haired woman who had been driving the truck had planted herself firmly in a seat beside Song. Kuji chose a seat where he would see the least of them.

The members each got their drinks from the self-serve drink bar and quenched their thirst as they exchanged casual opinions. By the time everyone had finished their first drink, a look of ease had finally crossed their faces.

Nosaka brought his second cup of coffee back to the table and began rehashing the rude attitude that Morimoto had shown them earlier.

“[Sou](#)**-san, you need to put your foot down,” he said to Song. “Young people these days don't know how to properly show respect.”

The female nurse chuckled. “It's a sign that you've gotten old, Mr. Nosaka,” she pointed out. Nosaka's face relaxed a little, but he continued to criticize Song.

“You trust people too easily. You don't know what young people could do. They lose their temper easily, they're not grateful for anything, and they'll kill people for the smallest of reasons.”

Kuji got the impression that Nosaka was talking about him, and proceeded to fix the man with a glare. Just then, the large woman sitting beside Song interrupted.

“Mr. Nosaka, that's no way to put it when we've got young people in this group. If you ask me, I think you can replace 'young people' with 'men in general' and it would make just as much sense.”

“Let's all take a step back,” Song said mildly as he intervened. “You're right that there are still many things that the government ought to be doing to help the unemployed and homeless. But our job is to reach out to the people who have fallen through the cracks of every single net and are floundering. It's just a matter of all of us doing what we can in our respective positions.”

Song went on.

"You know Reverend Pierre, who founded Emmaus? He is a great man, but he was very political and very radical in his beliefs. So to each his own way of thinking," Song said, quietly bringing the debate to a close. The members also appeared to have no complaints, and thus their meeting wrapped up.

The group parted ways once they exited the family restaurant. Kuji and Song climbed into Nosaka's compact truck just as they had that morning. Kuji was relieved to find that the woman was not there.

That evening, an unusual feast filled the kitchen of the church. Thinly-sliced grilled meat was piled high on a large platter, with a side of boiled potatoes and stewed beans. It was typical churrasco fare. The man who had asked for the late-night marriage ceremony had brought the food in from his workplace.

"I come with Mika later. But a little late," he had said in halting Japanese before rushing out.

"Let's be thankful and tuck in, Masatake," Song said.

The two of them sat across from each other at the small table and for a while focused on their food. The grilled meat was crispy and flavorful, and Song showed such an appetite that even Kuji was surprised.

Grilled meat is popular in his country, Kuji remembered. The Japanese were like herbivores in comparison, he thought. Although the meat was good, three slices of it was enough to make Kuji begin to feel bloated. He brought a spoonful of stewed beans to his lips instead.

"Yeah, I like this better. It's spicy and tastes good."

"Eat as much as you like, Masatake. Don't feel like you need to be modest. You're young; you need to eat meat more than I do."

"What, you want to enhance my libido, or something?" Kuji teased. "I'll end up coming to your bed at night, you know."

Song laughed good-naturedly. "Wouldn't want that," he said.

Even raunchy topics like these could be brushed off as jokes at mealtime. Kuji pretended to sulk, while at the same time feeling a bittersweet knot in his heart.

"What?" he said. "I thought that's what you wanted."

"I'll make sure to lock my door tonight."

"Even though you keep the rest of your church wide open?"

Kuji tried to remember the last time he had enjoyed such an exchange of casual banter like this. It wasn't his first time. He had experienced this enjoyable moment before.

Kuji continued to stare at the well-proportioned face in front of him.

After a while, he realized what he was feeling. Family time. He had been in elementary school then - yes, while his father still had his wits about him. It was before he had turned to drink and become violent toward his mother, younger sister, and brother.

"I'm telling you it has to be this."

"No fair, big brother!"

"Masatake, you're a big boy now. At least let her use it tomorrow. In exchange..."

"In exchange, what, Dad?"

He felt something lukewarm roll down his cheek.

"Oh..." Kuji sniffled. "Hot food gives me a runny nose," he said as he rubbed his eyes.

"Masatake..." Song said hesitantly, then smiled. He stood up, and put his arms around Kuji's head over the table.

"Hey, what are you..."

"Just be quiet."

The spoon slid out of his hand and clattered loudly as it hit the floor. Kuji hastily shoved Song's chest away. He rose from his chair and got down on the floor, pretending to look for his spoon. He stared hard at the floor and tightened the muscles in his throat. He was narrowly able to avoid sobbing out loud.

He took a deep breath before standing up.

"I think I'm getting sleepy from eating so much," he mumbled, his face turned aside.

"Is that so? Then, you can sleep in your room until they come. We need you, organ player."

Kuji left the man with the gentle voice behind him as he exited the kitchen.

Once he entered his small room on the second floor, he lay down on the bed in the darkness and stared up at the ceiling.

Why had he cried?

He had long stopped feeling sorry for himself; it was meaningless. No amount of self-pity would solve his past problems. Besides, people only felt sorry for themselves because they wanted other people to feel sorry for them, too.

Not a chance. Pity is the last thing I want. That's why I won't feel sorry for myself, either.

He wasn't so naive as to reminisce and cry over the happy times he had once spent with his family.

It's his fault.

It was all Song's fault.

It's his fault for making that kind of conversation.

Although priests did not marry, Kuji was sure that Song would sit across from a woman, just as they had done, and engage in conversation like they did. He had cried because he was angry over that idea, Kuji thought to himself.

He wished Song was impotent. If only the man couldn't get it up no matter how hard he pumped his penis. Then, Kuji would even feel relieved.

If not....

How nice it would be if he could cut the man's penis off. Hadn't there been a story like that? Of some woman who had cut off her boyfriend's member and kept it with her?

It had appeared briefly in a novel that had caused a stir. It was a novel about a love affair, and it had been published some time ago. One of the girlfriends of a gang member had been carrying it with her. All of the guys who [m3]were literate had read it. Only the sex scenes, though - the rest they had skipped over.

The part about cutting the penis had come in at the end. Kuji had laughed it off, saying it was stupid and sounded painful. Now, looking back, he felt like he understood how the girl in the novel felt.

Without a penis, Song wouldn't be able to have sex with anyone anymore.

But Song would probably never sleep with anyone. Yes, even Buddhist monks took wives, and it was hard to believe that Catholic priests would remain

celibate for their whole life. But if Kuji could say one thing about Song with certainty, it was this: Song would never sleep with anyone. That was the kind of man he was.

But he was still a man, which meant that he would still get an erection by nature - by looking at women. Unless he was impotent. Song looking at women and getting erect - just the thought of it made the blood rise to his head. *No way. I won't have any of it.*

Kuji imagined Song getting erect underneath his robes. What would his penis look like? It probably wasn't much different from the many he had let inside him. Would it be a thick, rugged one to match his muscular physique?

He would draw Song's rearing penis inside his mouth, deep into his throat until his lips were around its base. And he would bite down and tear it off. That way, it would be his forever.

Kuji abruptly realized that he had been fondling his crotch absentmindedly, and hastily half-rose from the bed.

He wasn't in the mood right now. Pleasuring himself in this mood would only make him feel pitiful. More than pitiful - absurd, even. Masturbating while wishing the man that he loved was impotent.

Kuji reached underneath his bed and pulled out a bottle of vodka he had hidden there. He put his lips directly to the bottle and took a long swig. The hot liquid filled his belly. The heat in his groin subsided.

Before he knew it, he had emptied the bottle. The floor seemed to ripple, and Kuji fell face-forward on the bed. He buried his face in his pillow and inhaled his own alcoholic breath.

This is bad.

Kuji lifted his head, thinking he needed to get some of the alcohol out of his system. There was still time until that couple would come to the church, but he decided to stand up right away. He used the wall to guide him along as he carefully descended to the first floor. He planned to take a cold shower in hopes that it would help.

Kuji's eyes were half-closed as he stuck his arms out in front of him, feeling his way to open the door to the bathroom.

What greeted his eyes was Song, standing there naked. The man had just finished taking a shower, and his hair and body were dripping with water. Water droplets slid down his broad, muscular back. To Kuji's surprise, there were several band-like scars across it. They looked similar to what he had seen on a certain young gang leader in the detention center. But more than that, Kuji found his eyes glued on the man's toned and firm-looking butt.

"Masatake, you can come in. I'll be out in a second." Song spoke to him in the same tone as always. He turned so that he was facing Kuji directly. His toned body came into clear view. There was a line of dark hair growing from his belly button to his nether regions. From his groin reared the symbol of his manhood, pointed toward the heavens.

Kuji staggered into the bathroom.

"I guess you're not impotent, after all," he muttered, reaching out toward the man's penis. But just then, he tripped.

"Masatake!"

When Kuji came to, he was sitting on top of Song's belly on the floor. The man's hard member was pushed against his waist. As Kuji shifted his weight from the man's belly to on top of his thighs, he reached for Song's crotch.

"It's not fair. Why aren't you impotent?"

The man's penis was erect to the point of almost sticking to his belly.

"Look at you, getting it up like this. Were you thinking naughty thoughts while you were in the shower, huh? Do you always?"

Song looked up at Kuji and gave a wry smile.

"Maybe I ate too much meat. It was rubbed with garlic, too. I was trying to get the smell out, but..."

Damnit, damnit, growled Kuji as he pumped Song's penis with both hands. The stiff member grew even harder and began to throb.

"Masatake, that's enough," Song said gently. "Don't make this difficult for me by going further than that."

"Difficult? How? I'm not asking you to fuck me. Well, I'd want to, but you don't sleep with men or women, do you? Letting me do this is the least you can do."

"That's not what I mean."

"Then I wish you'd just become impotent! You're cruel, you know that?"

Kuji's face was a mess of tears and snot as he continued to stimulate Song's hardened penis. He brought his face close to its glistening tip. When he opened his mouth to let it in, Song sat up. The man's muscular arms circled around him.

"Masatake, you're a good boy. Now, stop."

"No," Kuji shot back. "I want you! Let me touch you!" Kuji twisted his body and tried to pry the man's arms off of him to no avail. His head was pressed against Song's dripping, broad chest. He could feel the man's rapid heartbeat. Song's warm hands rubbed his back. Kuji broke into loud sobs.

"It's okay. You can cry, Masatake. There's no need for you to hold back." The man's low whisper was soothing to the ear.

Eventually, the storm of tumultuous emotions brewing inside him settled into a peaceful calm. His eyelids drooped. Kuji closed his eyes. A warm darkness came over him.

He felt himself float as his body was lifted. When he fidgeted, a comforting hand rubbed his back again.

"Masatake, you can stay asleep. I'll carry you to your room," said the gentle voice. His body swayed gently as if he were being rocked in a cradle.

Kuji returned to the same house - the one in which he had spent his boyhood.

[Outpost village](#) An outpost village, or *hakenmura*, is a makeshift shelter for the homeless set up temporarily from the end of the year to the beginning of the following year.

[Sou](#) "Sou" is the Japanese pronunciation for the Chinese character of Song's name.

Chapter 4

"Sorry about yesterday. Getting drunk like that and not being able to play the organ."

The morning light was streaming into the small kitchen. Song wore his usual serene smile. He handed Kuji a mug of coffee.

"That's all right. But promise you'll play at their wedding instead?"

Kuji nodded and sipped his black coffee. He stole a sidelong glance at Song. The man was quietly drinking his own coffee as he read the newspaper.

"Hey, I'm going to go check out that guy's place. Asylum Net." He at least wanted to make up for the previous evening somehow.

Song put the paper down on the table and looked at him gravely.

"I don't want you to take a risk that you can't handle."

Kuji tilted his head in perplexity. The man almost sounded like Nango. Did Song know that he was an S?

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"It's true that we're concerned about that organization. But we don't necessarily want to take risks to pry into it. You don't like interacting with people much in the first place, do you, Masatake? There's also the fact that their facilities are in the entertainment district. I think you'd be in trouble if you ran into your old friends."

Kuji finally understood what Song was trying to get at.

"That's fine. I've told them I'm a NEET. It's true - I don't do anything other than play the organ. Besides, I'm pretty interested in that place. Not to mention I get to use the Internet as much as I want for free."

"If you say so," said Song as he studied Kuji. Kuji sensed something in his gaze that was searching, and turned his face aside. He slurped his coffee loudly.

Kuji put his cell phone in the pocket of his jumper and went outside.

Nango had told him to report not only about people that Song met with directly, but also people in which he showed interest. He could have contacted Nango before he set off, but he found it too much of a hassle. Nango would often call him first when they met at scheduled intervals. Kuji decided to wait for his call.

He had heard that Morimoto owned a few shelters, but mainly stayed at the one in Okubo and used it as his headquarters. Kuji decided to take the Oedo subway line to Shinjuku.

Kuji traced the address to headquarters, which turned out to be an old building close to the station. The surrounding multiple-tenant buildings were occupied by massage parlors, Internet cafes, and arcades. It was a place where the young might congregate.

Morimoto welcomed Kuji enthusiastically and spoke eloquently about his activities.

Here in the urban center, where redevelopment was underway, offices were beginning to occupy more area. Many tenants were leaving older buildings because they didn't have adequate facilities. Owners, however, did not have the financial means to rebuild the buildings on their own. Nor could they hope to

sell the building while its value remained low. That was why they waited for others to swoop in with a proposal for large-scale redevelopment, and rented the buildings out at discount rates for the limited period of time until the redevelopment was to begin.

"There are a lot of buildings like that. And a lot of them are in front of the station, too. That's because locations near the station have potential for redevelopment."

"Uh-huh," Kuji responded unenthusiastically. Morimoto laughed.

"I guess you wouldn't really care about this stuff," he said.

At the shelter, such office spaces had been furnished with bunk beds and coin-operated lockers. There were convenience stores nearby which provided easy access to meals and everyday necessities.

Although it was hardly comparable to a stay at a hotel or traditional Japanese inn, this environment was sufficient enough for Internet cafe refugees. The only necessities they required were a simple shower and a computer.

Several computers were set up on a counter, in a manner similar to an Internet cafe.

"It's a cable connection, so people can use as much as they want. You can use it, too," Morimoto said to him. "Feel free to look for employment on the Internet."

Kuji was then shown to the basement boiler room, which had previously been used to store the steam boilers to heat the building. In the room there were several large laundry machines which were commonly seen in American housing complexes.

"These are for people who can't afford to put their clothes out for dry

cleaning. If you ever feel like doing something," Morimoto offered, "would you be able to come in for about two hours each day to run the machines? The residents all put their laundry in a bag and bring them here. We charge a set fee per bag. All you have to do is put that laundry in the machine and run it through the wash cycle. After that, just throw it in the dryer."

Kuji almost burst out laughing. It was exactly what he used to do in jail.

"I won't be able to come in every day, but sure."

"That's great. It'll be a great help," said Morimoto with a genuine-looking smile. Kuji wondered with apprehension what Song could be worried about.

"I went," Kuji told Song during dinner. Song had stewed the leftover meat from the previous night with kimchi. He ladled the juices generously over the meat and rice in the bowl and handed it to Kuji.

"Isn't there anything you want to hear about it?" Kuji asked.

"Eat first. You must be hungry."

Kuji spooned the food into his mouth as he threw glances over at Song, who was sitting across from him.

"I searched up Emmaus on the computer at Morimoto's place."

"Why?"

"You're part of it, right?"

"No. I'm not affiliated with them," Song said, "but I agree with the spirit of what they do."

"And that Pierre guy you were talking about - he slept with women, right?"

"Yes, he's openly admitted that. Being open is very much something he would do. It's an honest and fearless way of living."

"If you look up to him so much, then it should be okay for you to sleep with women, too."

Song laughed and paused from his meal.

"I do respect Reverend Pierre, but this and that are two different things. His political influence and achievements are admirable, and he is very devout. But I want to do things my own way."

Kuji stopped talking and focused on bringing food to his mouth. He ate for a while, then looked up again from his bowl.

"You mean both for sex and for charity activities?"

"I guess you can say that. After all, both are based on personal feelings."

Kuji looked steadily into Song's eyes. "I remember you saying that before. So it's not your thing to appeal to the government?"

"No, actually. I don't trust the government or the nation. That's why I can't commit myself completely to those activities like Reverend Pierre does. That's why I'm not qualified to be a part of Emmaus."

"What...?"

He had never heard such negative words come out of Song's mouth before. Song's faraway eyes looked like those of someone he knew. Yes, the person he always saw in the mirror-

"Does that..." He couldn't find the words to follow. Kuji put his spoon in his bowl and looked down. "Does that have to do with your country?"

"It might, it might not. How about you, Masatake? Do you trust your country and government?"

Kuji kept his eyes down as he shook his head. "Who would? Not with the state this country's in."

"I see. Well, I think so, too. That's why I've decided to believe in the kingdom of God. In the kingdom of God, everyone is equal. Everyone will lend a hand to the weak. So that's why I thought of doing the same in this world."

Usually, Kuji would scoff inwardly and call him fake, but instead, he murmured, "I see."

Kuji knew little about the country from which the man came. He also did not know why it was divided into the north and south. He knew none of these things, even though the country was so close.

"Where were you born?" Kuji asked as he raised his head.

"Cheon-wang."

"Huh?"

"It's a small village that no one probably knows about. I don't think you'd be able to find it on Google Earth or even on the map." Song smiled. Kuji felt a sense of ease at the familiar expression on his face.

"I guess I don't know anything about you, huh?"

"That's because you don't ask, Masatake. I'd be glad to tell you anything if I asked."

"Have you slept with anyone before?"

"That question's not allowed." Song reached out and pressed his index finger against Kuji's lips. Before Kuji could swallow the saliva in his mouth, Song

drew his hand away.

"Masatake, any seconds? You should eat more."

Kuji thought about Song while Nango penetrated him. He remembered the man's fingers pressed against his lips. Once, back when he had been learning piano from Song in juvenile, they had played a duet together. Kuji had played the left hand part and Song, the right hand.

The man had thick, rugged, and strong fingers. They were noticeably long, especially after the first knuckle. His nails were trimmed short, free of dirt, and were pink. Occasionally Kuji's right hand would cross with his, come away, then draw near again.

Kuji had gotten an erection while he played.

Those fingers. He imagined curling his tongue around those fingers that had pressed against his lips. He would open wide, entwine his tongue around them, and graze them with his teeth.

Meanwhile, he would put his own fingers into Song's mouth. Two of them. He wanted Song to lick his fingers, too.

"Masatake, your fingers are so slender and beautiful." That was how Song had complimented him when they played the duet.

"So are yours," Kuji had muttered, his face beet-red.

Yes. If Song wouldn't give him his penis, his fingers would do. He wanted Song to knead his hole with those long fingers. To carve out his insides vigorously. He didn't mind if it bled. With those fingers, Song would probably

be able to reach in very far. He wanted the man to delve his fingers deep into his intestines, to drag out his organs, and kill him. To fuck him to death.

A hot, throbbing wave burst out of him. The tip of his penis trembled as the white liquid came out in a continuous spurt. Kuji was almost exasperated at how deprived of pleasure he had apparently been. He was overcome with dizziness as wave after wave of pleasure washed over him.

"Nnhâ€”â€”ahâ€”ahâ€”!" he moaned in loud, short bursts.

"Wow, you're honest today, huh? You always avoid making noise," he heard Nango's voice over his shoulder, tinged with amused contempt. "Thanks for moaning so sweetly like that. My cock is that good, huh?"

As if, Kuji thought internally as he gritted his teeth.

He felt the man's weight bear down upon his back. The man's hands, which had been on his buttocks, came around to the front.

"You're hard again already. Really in the mood today, aren't you?"

Nango suddenly burst into raucous laughter.

"I know. You must be thinking about Song."

"No," Kuji ground out, but Nango continued to laugh loudly.

"You clenched the moment you heard his name. Your body doesn't lie. You're fantasizing about his cock being inside you, aren't you?"

Kuji shook his head in protest.

"Whatever," the man said as he began to thrust vigorously in and out of him. Kuji's buttocks were spread open wide as he was rammed by the man's boulder-like member. His hip joints ached as his legs were spread as widely as they would allow. His knees buckled, and he ended up splayed on his stomach like a

frog.

"So? Does Song fuck you? Huh?"

As much as Kuji wanted to say no, the pressure on his chest made it hard for him to speak. He was yanked over and flipped onto his back. Nango clenched his ankles.

"Answer me, fag."

The man raised Kuji's legs high, then folded them over so that he was almost folded double on his back.

Nango's face drew closer. Kuji screwed his eyes shut.

His whole body ached. Especially his hamstrings.

The pain was his fault, for thinking of unnecessary things. *You brought this upon yourself*, Kuji reprimanded himself internally as he sat up on the bed.

Nango, as always, was sitting at the table checking Kuji's phone. He inserted the memory chip into his own phone and opened the image file.

"Uh-huh," he grunted. "Song told you to keep a watch on this guy?"

"He didn't tell me to keep watch. He said that he wanted to know what he was up to. That's why I offered..."

Nango gave him an exasperated look. "Are you Song's S, now? Don't stick your nose in things you don't need to."

"But you said so yourself. You told me to report whatever Song seems to take an interest in."

"Whatever," Nango dismissed as he put the cell phone away. "We'll look this guy up. So, what exactly about this guy bothers Song?"

"I don't know."

"Fine, whatever," Nango said again as he stood up.

"Nango, I want to ask you something."

"What?"

"Who is Song, really?"

"That's none of your business." Nango suddenly approached the bed and grabbed at Kuji's groin. He clamped his hand around Kuji's balls and twisted them hard. Kuji screamed in pain and collapsed on the bed.

"See? This is what you get when you ask stupid things. Even worse, it'll cost you your life. It's for your own good that you don't know."

Kuji was writhing in pain, but nevertheless looked up at Nango with tear-filled eyes.

"Cheon...wang..."

"What?"

"Song said... Cheon-wang. Said... he was born... there."

Nango knitted his brow thoughtfully. "That was pretty clumsy of him to give that away. Not like him at all."

Nango went back to the table and sat back down in the chair. He pulled out a cigarette from his jacket pocket and put it in his mouth.

"Or did he trust you that much?" He let out a slow puff of smoke. "Cheon-wang is a village in the North. It's close to the border with China."

"North...? Is that... a problem?" Kuji asked as he massaged his balls, trying to distract himself from the pain. Nango gave him a look that said, "Don't be stupid." But he soon shrugged and took a long drag.

"Well, I guess even an S for Public Safety wouldn't necessarily be well-versed in international affairs. An idiot like you probably wouldn't read the paper, either. Maybe that's what makes you an ideal S. All you guys have to do is carry out what you've been ordered to do. When you start having your own thoughts is when you start sticking your nose into things that are none of your business."

Nango ground his cigarette butt in the ash tray as he stood up and approached Kuji again. When Kuji looked at him in fear, he grinned, reached out, and ruffled his hair.

"We think he's a sleeper for the North. Eventually someone is bound to appear who will make contact with him. Be a good boy and stick with him until it happens. Don't sleep with him, though. You've got the hots for him and you'd probably blabber everything in bed. You'd be the one to get caught in the honey trap. That's all the more reason why it's best for you not to know."

"He won't," Kuji blurted out without thinking.

"What?"

"He won't sleep with me."

"That's too bad. You'd want him to fuck you, wouldn't you?" Nango ran his large hand from Kuji's head to his chin and gripped it like a vice.

"But you're *my* S. You remember that."

The fingers stopped on the keys, and the last chord faded along with the singing voices.

"Thank you," a man's happy voice said in clumsy Japanese. Song's low voice followed.

"Let's decide on a date for your ceremony, then. Hmm, you said your witness would be a friend of yours? And the people attending your wedding would be..."

Kuji closed the lid on the organ as he listened to the voices behind him. He disguised the pain he felt in his joints as he quietly retreated to the kitchen.

Song returned as Kuji was having a drink of water. He still had his surplice on over his vestments as he approached Kuji and peered down at him with a worried look.

"Masatake, has someone done something bad to you? You look like you're in pain."

"Not really," Kuji said shortly as he shrank away. "Today's guy was just a little on the kinky side, that's all."

Song's thick eyebrows remained drawn together.

"You, um... you do use a condom, right?"

"Damnit, I do! Just leave me alone!"

The burning knot in Kuji's chest stirred up a surge of emotions that burst out of him in a yell.

"It's all your fault!" he shouted. "If you'd sleep with me, I wouldn't have to go and find someone else!" *I wouldn't have to moan as Nango fucks me. I would've been spared from stroking his ego and making him think he's not as*

clumsy as he is.

And he has the nerve to tell me that I look like I enjoy his cock. Fucking bastard. It's not like I have a choice. It's because Song won't sleep with me.

"It's all your fault!"

He knew his anger was misdirected, but he couldn't help but direct it at something. He clung to Song as he yelled.

"Just once, come on! You probably suck, anyway, right? Just sleep with me once, and I'll know how bad you are and I won't have to think about you like this all the time. After that, I promise I'll never ask again. Set me free, will you?"

Song was silent as he circled his arms around Kuji. He wrapped him in an embrace as if he were soothing a child with a tantrum.

"Maybe you're right. Masatake, I'm sorry."

Song then sat down on the floor. Kuji ended up in his lap.

Kuji swore as he pulled down his fly and pulled his manhood out of his pants. He desperately pumped his penis, flaccid from being wrung dry earlier. He rubbed its tip against Song's robes. He half-expected to be pushed away, but Song continued to stroke his back.

Kuji's penis was slow to harden. Frustrated, he dug his nails into the head. A little pain always made it feel good. Eventually some liquid began to dribble from his member, and made wet sounds as his hands fondled it. Kuji looked at Song with teary eyes.

"Aren't you gonna get angry?"

Song said nothing as he held Kuji's head to his chest. Kuji felt his whole body being wrapped in warmth and comfort.

Kuji pulled his pants down to his thighs and began to stroke his penis with both hands. Once in a while, he rubbed its glistening tip against Song's clothes.

"Ahh, nnhâ€”â€”! Soâ€”goodâ€”ahh!"

Kuji let go of all restraint as he moaned loudly in pleasure and moved his fingers vigorously. When he closed his eyes, he saw the same light that he always did. The dazzling light came cascading down upon him from on high. Encompassed in its glow, Kuji called the name of the man he loved.

They held each other as they lay on the floor of the kitchen. Kuji woke from his shallow slumber and looked up at the man who held him.

Anything the man said now would have made him feel embarrassed. Kuji hastily averted his eyes. But Song said nothing as he continued to stroke his back. He wished they could be like this forever.

Kuji resolutely sat up, rearranged himself, and extracted himself from Song's arms. He pulled up his pants, putting away his now-drooping penis. He looked at the man's white clothing, which he had splattered with cum.

"I made it dirty."

"That's all right. I just have to put it in the wash."

Even though Kuji hadn't said a word of apology, Song still understood. The thought made Kuji rub his eyes hastily as they began to water. He didn't want to embarrass himself any more in front of Song.

"Take it off, then. I'll put it in the wash before it stains," Kuji said as he took the surplice from Song. The topic of laundry reminded him of something else.

"Say, I decided to do laundry work at that place."

"Laundry?"

"At Morimoto's."

Kuji then remembered Nango's words.

"Why are you so hung up on him?" he asked. Song got to his feet and walked toward the coffee maker. He turned it on and turned back to face Kuji with a grave expression on his face.

"Homeless people, as you probably know, have no one to turn to. Some people try to take advantage of that. Maybe Internet cafe refugees are slightly different, but you can never be too careful."

Although Kuji wasn't quite sure what the man meant, he remembered Nango's words. *People from the North.*

"Does it... have something to do with your country? With abduction?"

Song widened his eyes for a moment. Kuji inwardly regretted it. He wasn't supposed to know that Cheon-wang was in the North.

But Song nonetheless turned a pair of calm eyes to Kuji.

"It might be, it might not be. It's not only abduction. I've met many people from many different countries through NPOs and Emmaus, and I've heard about the kind of crimes that people from impoverished countries get caught up in."

Kuji wondered what that had to do with people not having family to turn to, but he could not bring himself to pursue it further.

"I see."

Kuji headed to the bathroom with the surplice in hand. He tossed it into the washing machine that was in the adjacent change room. While he was at it, he

took off everything he was wearing and tossed it in the wash as well.

He gazed at the water swirling inside the machine as he thought - about how he had masturbated in Song's lap.

It had felt so good because Song was watching over him. Even though he hadn't been able to get the man to penetrate him. The man had still let Kuji pleasure himself. He hadn't gotten angry when Kuji had called his name when he came.

He figured the man probably pitied him. But he didn't care. He decided that from now on, whenever he got in the mood, he would think about Song while he pleased himself. Song had let him, at least.

Until now, whenever he had masturbated while thinking about Song, he had always felt degradation and regret. But now that he knew Song would forgive him for it, he knew he could do it without feeling ashamed. This was enough. At least for him.

I know. When Nango fucks me, I'll just think about Song when I come. Kuji smiled to himself while he closed the door of the washing machine. He realized his limbs felt light and he could move them with ease, even though they had been hurt and had felt leaden and heavy before.

As Kuji emerged from his daydream, the cold air chilled his stark-naked body. He sneezed as he made his way up to the second floor. Once he lay down on his bed, numerous thoughts rose in his mind.

Nango had said that Song was a sleeper for the North.

But if he was, why would he be occupied about Morimoto? Wouldn't he only draw suspicion by mentioning things that could be connected to abduction? In that sense, Kuji felt almost certain that there was no way that Song would be

from the North.

Nango was wrong, he thought.

But that was all right - if it meant he could continue to be with Song.

He would do everything he could for the man to make him happy. He would prove to Song that he was useful. That way, if he escaped from Nango, Song would probably let him stay here. *I don't believe in God, but I believe in you. You forgive and accept everything about me.*

No matter what horrible things I've done.

In his dreams, Kuji was playing the organ with Song.

Amazing grace how sweet the sound

That saved a wretch like me.

I once was lost but now am found,

Was blind but now I see.

Chapter 5

Regular users of Asylum Net were mostly in their twenties and thirties, with the occasional person in their forties who had just been laid off. Morimoto also ran a job posting website on the Internet, and actively introduced regulars to the employers registered there.

The lucky ones who were able to snag a job would go out and come back late at night. When they had free time, they chatted with their roommates. A sense of community, so rare among young people of today, blossomed here. Some roommates would move out to rent an apartment together. Once they rented a place, they would be able to enroll in health insurance. It was a chance for them to move up from the lowest rungs of society.

There were still few people who had reached the next milestone beyond that - permanent, full time employment - but Kuji felt that this system worked.

Then, what was the problem?

Just as he was thinking of telling Song that there was nothing to be suspicious about, it happened.

A youth named Ogura, who had been staying at the shelter for three months now, approached Kuji. He had asked Kuji to do his laundry a number of times, and on this day, too, he came down to the basement boiler room with his laundry bag in hand.

"You can leave it there," said Kuji, in the midst of tossing someone else's laundry into the machine. Ogura fidgeted on the spot.

"Hey," he said, "do you remember Yoshida? He was here for about six months, remember?"

It had been less than a month since Kuji had begun working here. Perhaps because of his job as an S, he was better than most at remembering names and faces. But even then, he was not able to recall Yoshida.

"You know I only come into the basement for a little bit every day, right?" Kuji said. "Everyone's out working when I come in during the day. How should I know about him?"

"Yeah, but he was a bit of a clean freak," Ogura replied. "He put out his laundry every day."

Kuji was finally able to conjure a vague mental image. He remembered Yoshida was a little heavysset and bespectacled, with an appearance of a stereotypical otaku, or geek. Now that Ogura mentioned it, he hadn't seen the young man for a while. But there were many people like that.

"Are you sure he didn't just move out into an apartment somewhere because he had enough money?"

Ogura shook his head firmly. "That can't be."

"How do you even know? Are you guys best friends, or something?"

"No, but... I have proof." Ogura brought a closed fist out from behind his back, stuck it under Kuji's nose, and opened his hand slowly.

"Huh?" Kuji said.

"Don't you know what this is? It's Darth Vader."

"Yeah, I know that. But what about it?"

"He and I are both huge fans of action figures and figurines. You know what

"I'm getting at, right?" Ogura said with a look of derision. Kuji almost threw a punch at him, but managed to hold off and nod instead.

"So?"

"See, you don't get it. This is super rare. The only thing he'd treasure more is his life!" Ogura burst out loudly. He caught himself and hastily put his hand over his mouth. Kuji was a little exasperated to see someone get so worked up about nothing in this day and age. He turned away from the boy in front of him.

"I'm busy. We can talk later."

"Wait! You're the only one I can talk to," Ogura said, pulling at his sleeve.

"Go to Morimoto. He's the boss of this place."

"I can't. He's probably one of them."

Kuji turned around and saw fear in Ogura's eyes. He closed the door of the washing machine and jerked his chin.

"This way," he said, and led the boy behind an unused boiler, where they both sat down.

"What are you talking about?" he asked once they were settled.

"You know about urban legends? There's one going around among Internet cafe refugees. They say if you keep on wandering around like this, someday you'll get kidnapped and taken somewhere."

"Kidnapped..." Kuji felt some flags go up his mind. But they were talking about nothing more than an urban legend.

Ogura looked panicked at Kuji's unconvinced look. "That's why I'm saying, isn't it weird that Yoshida's gone?" he insisted.

"Like I said, some guys move out to rent an apartment. Other ones go back to

the countryside. Some of them actually become homeless. Maybe he's gone and done one of those."

"But I think he would take this along." The little Darth Vader on the palm of the boy's hand looked anything but valuable. But for an action figure fanatic, perhaps it was.

"Then, maybe he left his stuff behind to stay overnight somewhere else because he's doing an overnight shift at work."

Ogura shook his head.

"His locker and bunk bed are all cleaned out. The locker had the key back inside, and it was empty."

"Isn't that weird?" Kuji asked. "You mean he didn't keep his precious action figure in his locker?"

Ogura yet again gave him a look of scorn. "He used to keep this on the frame of his bunk bed and look at it until he fell asleep. His figurines are his life. Of course he would keep it in close reach."

Ogura had been on the top bunk of the same bed, and when they found out that they both shared the same interest in "geek" or "Akihabara" pop culture, they had hit it off and shared stories about their upbringing as well.

"I'm an Evangelion fan, though," Ogura said, his nostrils flaring proudly. Kuji had no response for that.

"Can you get on with the rest of the story? Besides, where did you even find that?"

"I was just about to tell you," Ogura said sullenly, and resumed. "I was lying on my bed writing my resume when I dropped my pen."

He had climbed down from the bunk bed and gotten down on the floor to look at the gap between the bottom bunk and the floor.

"That's when I found it. It was on the floor. There's definitely something wrong with that. He would never leave it lying on the floor like that. He was always careful not to drop it, and when other people touched it by mistake, he'd get really angry."

Kuji felt he had a point. The figurine was small enough to be hidden in one's closed fist.

"When was the last time you saw that Yoshida guy?"

"Five days ago. He said Mr. Morimoto found him a good job, and he was really stoked. He hadn't been working for about a week that time. He was pretty eager to go back. But he didn't come home that day. I had the late shift on the cash register at the convenience store, and even when I came home after that, he still hadn't come back."

"And you haven't seen him since?"

Ogura nodded.

"And when I looked the next day, his things and his sheets were gone, too. I hadn't found his Darth Vader yet, so I thought he'd moved out. I was kind of pissed that he didn't even say bye, but I figured that was how things went."

"You had other roommates, right? Did you ask them?"

Ogura shrugged. "I did just in case, but no one saw him leave."

Nango would probably have done a better interrogation. But Kuji had no idea what else he could ask. He tried to sort through his thoughts.

"Okay. So, one: Yoshida left. Two: His Darth Vader was left behind. We can't

say for sure that Yoshida was abducted based on just these two things. But there's one solid fact that we can deduce. Yoshida wasn't the one who cleaned out his belongings. Correct?"

Ogura widened his eyes. "I see. Wow, you're smart."

"I just sorted out what you told me. There's a possibility[m1] that Yoshida was too busy and asked someone else to bring his stuff for him. But I don't think so. He would probably tell that person to bring the Darth Vader, no matter what. If the guy that packed for him forgot, Yoshida would probably come fetch it himself, or he would contact you and tell you to keep it safe."

"You're smart," Ogura said again, impressed. Kuji wondered what else he could think of. There was a phrase - one he heard on television often.

"The police have affirmed the possibility of foul play in this incident."

But if Yoshida had been abducted or disappeared as a result of foul play, would he bother to come and retrieve his belongings?

No. Someone had come to fetch them so as not to generate suspicion. If Ogura hadn't found the Darth Vader figurine, everyone would have assumed that Yoshida had simply moved out. Which meant that the person who had come to retrieve Yoshida's belonging had also gotten him involved in something sinister.

"Hey, remember how you said Morimoto might be 'one of them'? What do you mean by that?"

"Because he told me that Yoshida came to pick up his own stuff," Ogura answered. "He lied."

"He told you directly?"

"Yeah."

"When was that? Just now?"

Ogura nodded. Kuji could barely restrain himself from calling Ogura an idiot. He could have asked immediately after Yoshida left, and it would have been no problem. But asking now would almost make him seem like he had caught on to the disappearance.

If Morimoto really was one of the abductors, Ogura's question would have put him on guard. Yoshida's disappearance had already become an accomplished fact in Kuji's mind. And his final conclusion was that Yoshida had disappeared as a result of foul play.

But what kind of foul play? Was it what Song had been worried about? Kuji had no idea how to go from there. He stuck his hand out toward Ogura.

"I'll keep the Darth Vader for now."

Ogura handed it over to him without a moment's hesitation. "Sure," he said. "If Yoshida comes back and I'm not home, I wouldn't be able to give it to him, anyway. I've got work, too."

"Well, yeah, I guess," Kuji said.

Kuji left the building, sticking both hands in the pockets of his leather jacket. The entertainment district was lit up with streetlamps and neon lights, making the place seem brighter than it had been during the overcast day. He made his way toward the subway station when he was suddenly grabbed by the arm.

"Whatâ€?" Kuji was dragged forcefully into a gap between two buildings. He whipped his head up to see an angry face right up close to his.

"Nango!"

"You bastard, you didn't pick up my calls to meet! What have you been doing these past two weeks?"

Kuji desperately tried to twist out of Nango's grip.

"I'm not letting you go," the man snarled, snapping his teeth like a wild animal as he pinned Kuji's arms behind him and pushed his head against the concrete wall. A hand towel was shoved into his mouth before Kuji could even raise his voice. Nango pulled off Kuji's leather jacket down to his forearms and tied the sleeves together. His hands were bound behind him and he could not move. Kuji leaned against the wall.

His pants were quickly yanked down to his ankles.

"Listen. You're my S. Got that? Rebel against me, and I'll kill you. I'm serious."

Kuji's legs were spread apart, and a searing hot rod was jammed into his very core.

"Nghhh!" Kuji tried to scream, but the towel was pushed further into his mouth to stop him. Kuji gagged and flexed his abdomen, trying to fight the urge to vomit. He felt the thing inside him and arched his back reflexively.

"Don't move."

Nango grabbed him by the nape of the neck and bent him over a nearby garbage can.

"Show me your ass."

Kuji already was - in this position, bent over the trash can, his buttocks were already raised high. He heard a slam and whirled around to see one of the busboys from the sex parlors standing there with a trash bucket.

"Fuck off!" Nango barked. "Or else, I'll fuck you, too!"

The busboy tossed his bucket aside and closed the door hastily behind him.

"Talk about ruining the moment," Nango spat as he began to penetrate Kuji. Every time Kuji was pierced by the man's thick rod, his body recalled the pleasure he had felt when he masturbated in Song's lap. He hadn't had anal sex since then.

He felt the man's penis digging into his soft insides, and underlying his pain was the sensation that his innards were churning.

Yes, this was what he had wanted - the hot shaft of a man inside him.

Kuji did not even realize that he was gyrating his hips. He arched his back to match Nango's movements, devoured him deeply, and clenched. Every time the rod tried to get out of him, he latched on.

A moan escaped from the wadded towel in Kuji's mouth.

"That's what I like to hear. Finally remembering what my cock tastes like, huh?" he heard Nango say with his usual contempt, but Kuji was beyond caring about appearances. He nodded his head vigorously, giving Nango a pleading look over his shoulder.

"That's it, beg for my compassion," Nango said as he breathed raggedly, picking up his pace.

"Nhâ€”nhhâ€”!"

He called Nango's name when he climaxed. Fortunately for Kuji, the towel prevented his outburst from forming coherent words.

Nango zipped up his fly while he looked down at Kuji, who was lying, spent, on the ground. He kicked at Kuji's ribs.

"Give me your cell phone."

When Kuji handed it over, Nango took out the memory chip and put it into another phone. He pressed some numbers, forwarded the data, and when that was done, he dropped the cell phone on Kuji's belly.

"Use this one. The number is the same. So is all the data that's stored in it."

Nango then placed his foot on top of Kuji's groin.

"Nango..."

Nango sniffed derisively when Kuji looked at him with fearful eyes.

"I won't hurt you, bastard. You can still make yourself useful. But," he said, as he leaned his weight on Kuji's crotch, "if you try to do anything stupid again..."

The foot came off. Kuji somehow managed to sit up. Nango's face was closing in towards him.

"Listen. All you have to do is moan for my penis and that's it. You wanted it, didn't you? You latched onto me like some fucking octopus."

Kuji didn't want to admit it, but it was true. He looked silently up at Nango instead. But Nango showed neither derisive contempt nor anger as he looked back at Kuji with hard eyes.

"Don't let your thoughts wander on things that don't matter. Don't wish for things you can't have."

He was absolutely right, Kuji thought. But he still shook his head vehemently. He closed his eyes, bracing to be given a blow, but the blow did not come. He snapped his eyes open to see Nango with his back to him.

"All you have to do is keep watch on Song. Do anything else, and I can't guarantee that you'll make it out alive."

When Kuji got back to the church, Song was nowhere to be found.

Kuji's pants gave off a sour odor, a mix of wet garbage, semen, and sweat. The smell still clung to him even after he had taken off his pants. He decided to take a shower.

Once Kuji was naked and in the shower room, he finally understood the reason for the smell.

"The bastard didn't wear a condom," Kuji swore under his breath as he inserted his fingers in from behind and opened himself up. The white liquid that the man had funneled into him dripped down his thigh. Kuji took his time to clean his insides thoroughly in the shower. When he inserted his fingers, he could feel how hot it was and how the folds of flesh in its inner lining throbbed. His body was still thirsting for a penis regardless of his will. He loathed the fact that his body had grown accustomed to Nango.

"Damnit... damnit..." Kuji growled as he fingered himself. He tried to imagine Song's fingers, but the only image that rose on the back of his eyelids was Nango's face and his fiercely-rearing penis.

Defeated, Kuji pulled his fingers out and splashed his restless body with cold water. He wrapped a towel around his waist and headed to the kitchen, where he found Song waiting.

Kuji kept his head down as he drew closer, ashamed of having climaxed ecstatically at the hands of Nango. But he still decided to come clean.

"...I did it again."

Song placed his hand gently on Kuji's head. "Masatake, God will not abandon you because of that. You have nothing to fear."

"But youâ€™!" Kuji burst out loudly as he roughly brushed Song's hand off of him. "You think I'm filthy, don't you? Telling you that I love you like that, even jerking myself off on your lap... and then still liking it when I'm fucked by another guy! I even promised myself I'd stop... make do by thinking about you while I do it myself... but I still let myself get fucked, and I came, over and overâ€™"

Kuji's last words were hoarse, and he turned his face aside, feeling ashamed. But Song only placed his hand again on Kuji's head.

"God made men's bodies this way. There's nothing we can do about that."

If there really was a God, how idiotic it was for Him to do this, Kuji thought. He shifted his gaze back to Song. He studied the peaceful face looking back at him.

"And... how about you? You're not impotent. Don't you get urges to do it sometimes? Or are you not allowed to jerk off, either? How do you restrain yourself? Is it super easy? Piece of cake?"

"Super easy, piece of cake, huh. Sounds like typical teenager speak," said Song, his lips turning up slightly. "I will say that I do find it very difficult sometimes."

Kuji widened his eyes in astonishment. "How... how do you resist?"

"There was someone who once saved my life. When I remember that, and it's not difficult anymore."

"Your life..." He had never expected those words to come out of Song's

mouth. He was expecting to hear things about God's love, or absolute happiness, or a ticket to Heaven. Things like that.

He suddenly recalled what Nango had said.

"We think he's a sleeper for the North."

Song's life had been in danger - because he was a spy? Were the scars on his back related to that? Yet Song had said that he did not believe in his country. Would someone be a spy for a country he did not trust? He didn't know.

Kuji continued to stare at Song in silence. Song slid his hand off of Kuji's head and lifted the napkin on the table to reveal a deep dish containing rice balls.

"A member of the congregation made them. Let's have dinner. Go and put your clothes on."

Kuji returned to the change room, picked up his underwear and pants from the floor, and headed toward the washing machine. Before throwing the clothes in, he reached into the pockets. He pulled out the cell phone that Nango had given him, and also found the Darth Vader figure that came out with it.

"Oh..." He had completely forgotten about Ogura. Kuji changed quickly and went back to the kitchen, calling out to Song, who was pouring coffee for both of them.

"Hey, I heard something weird today," he said. Song paused from pouring the coffee as Kuji continued to elaborate. The man furrowed his brow and appeared to lapse deep into thought. Deep wrinkles were etched between his eyebrows.

"Masatake, to tell you the truth, I've actually also heard rumors. Not like the urban legend that Ogura mentioned to you, but it might be something similar. The only difference is that this was a horrible and very criminal act. When I first

heard about it, I thought it was absurd. I had trouble believing it."

"And what's that?" Kuji glared impatiently at Song for drawing his story out. "Tell me."

Song looked worriedly at Kuji. "It's very frightening. You might not be able to bear hearing about it, Masatake."

"Don't worry, I'm a spy for Public Safety," he wished he could say. But he couldn't. "I've been in jail, you know," he said instead, puffing his chest out. "I was even a part of the yakuza. Little things aren't gonna scare me."

"Oh, right. I'd forgotten. Seeing how you are, now, Masatake, I wouldn't even be able to imagine," Song smiled wryly as he handed Kuji his coffee. "Maybe coffee wasn't the best drink to go with rice balls," he added as an afterthought.

After dinner, Song asked if he would be able to meet Ogura. "I want to see him in person and hear his story."

Kuji cocked his head, unsure. "He's working part-time at a convenience store right now. I don't know what his shifts are like. Let me call him and see." With that, he flipped open the phone that Nango had given him. Ogura's number was already listed. The young man picked up immediately.

"He's working the evening shift. He'll be finished at twelve," Kuji kept his cell phone to his ear as he told Song. "He says he'll be able to come by bike, so he's going to go home to Okubo first. What do you want to do?"

"Let's pick him up."

Kuji was surprised at the man's answer, but nonetheless told Ogura, anyway.

"He says there's no problem with that. But why?" he asked as he put the cell phone away in his back pocket.

"We shouldn't wait until tomorrow. It's just a gut feeling." Song pulled out his own cell phone and began contacting someone else. Once he was done, he looked over at Kuji. "I'm going out for a bit," he said. He looked clearly on-edge, wearing an unusually severe look.

"Where're you going?" Kuji asked.

"I'm going to rent a car. The subways won't be running at midnight anymore, remember?"

Kuji could see his point.

"Catch some sleep, Masatake," Song told him. But even after returning to his room, Kuji found it hard to calm down. He had a feeling that something was going to happen behind his back without him having any awareness of it.

He clutched the cell phone that Nango had given him.

Chapter 6

Song unfurled the rest of his story as they drove along in the minivan.

"Emmaus is active around the world," he explained. "So, naturally they also have a wide information network. I'm not directly affiliated with them, but participating in their work often brings in information from other NPOs. I did call it a rumor earlier, but the information is actually quite accurate. It's not limited to the country that you're thinking of. Various groups abduct people for various reasons."

Generally it was understood that people abducted Japanese people in order to obtain their passports and impersonate them.

"Isn't that it?" Kuji asked. "Aren't they doing it so that they can become Japanese?"

Song did not answer him, but instead responded with a question of his own. "Well, did you know that in some countries, the sale of human organs is legal? Income disparity is extremely severe in those countries, and some will sell their organs for money."

"So, what about it?"

Song glanced over at Kuji. "That's how much organ transplants are in demand."

Kuji's eyes widened. "You... is that what you mean?"

"I can't say for sure, though."

Once, there had been a warning issued among groups who aided the homeless. Disappearances were already commonplace, as homeless people had no fixed address. But even if aid groups tracked the whereabouts of missing people, suspecting foul play, oftentimes they found out that these people had simply changed their sleeping places.

If abductors were after Japanese passports, all they needed was someone with a Japanese nationality. But if they were after healthy human organs, targeting homeless people would put them out of luck. With elderly homeless people on the rise, this was especially true.

"And that's the reason for targeting this specific group," Song said. "Internet cafe refugees are often young and healthy."

"That's what Morimoto's doing?"

"I don't know. But all of us are very careful about dealing with organizations that run any similar kind of business - especially when there's information about missing persons. Asylum Net is a name that has come up amongst us a few times already. We've been providing information to the police, but we haven't been able to get a hold of decisive evidence."

The car pulled in from Gaien-higashi-dori to Yasukuni-dori.

Nango was in possession of no such information, as far as Kuji knew. But in an organization as sectionalist as the police, perhaps it was the norm. Kuji remembered what Nango had told him - that the Public Safety division itself was divided into many small departments, where the personnel neither knew about each other nor the work that others did. As Kuji lapsed into thought, Song picked up where he had left off.

"And these people know that the country will never put spotlight on the

problem of Internet cafe refugees. A politician's word carries so little weight compared to the word of God."

Kuji stared at Song's face. "Are you a Communist?"

"No. I belong to the kingdom of God."

The car passed by the Kabukicho district and dipped under the Shinjuku Ogado overpass. The sidewalks were teeming with people as if it were daytime. Shinjuku continued to be active long past midnight.

"Do you know where he's working right now?" Song asked. "How about we pick him up directly?"

Kuji only knew that Ogura worked at a convenience store, and not the specific location. When he told Song that, the man said, "All right," and continued to drive. They stopped a block away from the building that housed Asylum Net.

"Is the entrance open twenty-four hours?"

"No. Some people work night shifts, but in that case the front desk is supposed to open the door when they come in."

"If you come in at this hour, would they let you in, Masatake?"

"Who knows," said Kuji, tilting his head. "I'm sure they'll open the door if someone I know is there."

"You should call your friend's cell instead. Let's have him come out to get you."

Kuji called, but was met with an automated responder that told him that the number he was trying to call was unavailable - that the phone was either turned off or out of range.

Song's face clouded over. "Let's go together," he said as he opened the driver's

side door.

When they pressed the buzzer at the entrance, Morimoto's voice answered.

"May I ask who this is?" Morimoto asked.

"Right on," Kuji murmured. But Song furrowed his brow. When Kuji tried to answer, Song stopped him.

"I'll talk to him," he said. "I'm sorry for visiting at such a late hour. I'm Song from Roppongi Church. We had the pleasure of talking to you the other day."

"Oh, yes, you must be the pastor from the other day," said Morimoto. The auto-lock clicked open and the two of them stepped inside. The reception desk was located right in front of the entrance, and Morimoto came out from the back.

"You're with him, too?" Morimoto asked when he spotted Kuji. "So, what brings you here, Pastor?"

"Priest," Song[SS3] corrected with a smile as he approached the man. "He says he's forgotten something here," he explained, referring to Kuji. "So I thought I might as well come and have a talk with you while we were here. We at the church provide advice and support to the unemployed and the reclusive. We were wondering if perhaps we could form a network with you and help you in some way."

Morimoto seemed to trust Song completely. "I don't want to keep you standing," he said. "Please, come on in."

Kuji watched the two of them disappear into the back before heading to the stairway. He had called minutes earlier to tell Ogura to meet him in the boiler room, since his roommates were probably already asleep. He opened the door and turned the light switch on.

"Ogura?" he called, but no one answered. He took a step forward and smelled an all-too-familiar odor. He almost turned back, sensing something wrong, but he decided against it. He crouched down, hid in the shadows of the washing machines, and surveyed his surroundings. No one was there. Kuji got on his elbows and knees and kept his belly to the floor as he inched forward. A scene exactly like the one he had imagined emerged before his eyes.

"Oh, shit..." he murmured, but he knew that swearing would do no good.

Beyond the washing machines was a growing pool of blood, and Ogura lying on his back in the center of it. For a second, he looked like he was smiling - but when Kuji realized it was actually a gaping gash under his chin that looked like a mouth, a shudder went through his entire body.

He scrambled to take his cell phone out of his jumper and called Song.

"Yes?" answered Song's calm voice. Kuji was almost in tears.

"Shit, Song, this is really bad. It's him, he's... he's dead. Someone killed him."

"Oh, no...." There was a pause, but Song quickly issued his next words. "Stay there," he ordered.

Kuji hung up and hugged his knees. The minutes that passed felt like hours. Eventually he heard footsteps. He tensed, wondering if it was Ogura's killer, but it was Song who came through the door. To his surprise, Morimoto was with him. Song had the man in a Nelson hold, with both of his arms held up behind his head.

"Morimoto!" Kuji sprang up in surprise.

"What the hell is wrong with you guys?" Morimoto burst out. "Dragging me out like this? I'm calling the police!"

"Now's not the time for that," Song said quietly. "Masatake, where is he?"

"Here," Kuji said as he led them over. Morimoto shrieked when he saw the body in the pool of blood, and proceeded to burst into tears. When Song released his hold, the man slumped to the floor. Song looked down at him.

"Mr. Morimoto, please explain," he said calmly. "You let someone in before we came, didn't you? If you knew he was going to do this, you'd be guilty of aiding and abetting murder."

"Of course I didn't know!" Morimoto protested. "He just... asked to be let in, so I... oh my God, why did this have to happen? I never asked for this. I was only running an honest business."

Song interrupted Morimoto's rambling.

"That's not what I'm asking. Mr. Morimoto, I saw a lot of surveillance screens in the guard room. You kept watch on this basement, too, didn't you? You knew that Ogura and Masatake here were talking to each other."

Kuji had no idea that there had been surveillance in the room. He snapped his head up to look around.

"It's all right. I turned them off," Song said.

"That's why you went with Morimoto," Kuji said in awe.

"You could say that," murmured Song. The man stepped away from Morimoto and drew closer to the body. "I was afraid it would happen, but I didn't think they'd act so quickly. The poor soul." Song got down on his knees, reached out, and touched Ogura's forehead. With his other hand, he crossed himself.

"Our Father, which art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come..." Song murmured a prayer before standing up and directing a harsh gaze at Morimoto. "And you told him that this boy would be in the basement."

Morimoto sniffled as he nodded. "He said they were only going to talk."

"How do you think he caught on?"

"Caught on? I didn't even know about this in the first place," Morimoto exclaimed. "I just told him that someone had asked about Yoshida. Besides, I don't even know where Yoshida could be."

"Probably not in this world anymore. Of course, no way you would know about that," Song said sarcastically.

Morimoto began to quake. "I-I really don't know. It's not my fault. I just... I'm just supposed to tell them who's healthy and has no relatives."

"Tell whom?"

"I don't know."

"And what do you get in return?"

"Just some operating budget. I just want to help people, all right? If I knew they'd get killed, I wouldn't have told them. Those guys said they were going to take people overseas to work. Residents were happy to go, since the pay was good."

"But that was a lie. I'm sure you must have started to have your doubts, too, right?"

Morimoto continued to weep as he shook his head.

"You can plead ignorance all you want, but no one will take it. You might as well come clean and say everything you know. It's the least you can do to atone."

Kuji looked on in astonishment. Song was good at interrogation. The man gripped Morimoto's arm and made him get to his feet.

"We're going out. And you're coming."

Kuji thought Morimoto would resist, but the man nodded quietly. "I don't wanna stay here," he said. "I'm scared. Take me away somewhere."

Morimoto walked to stand ahead of both of them. Just as he was about to lead them out, Song held him back.

"We shouldn't go out through the main entrance. Is there any way to get directly outside from the boiler room?"

"Yes," Morimoto and Kuji said in unison. "But why?"

"Whoever killed Ogura was extremely cruel but efficient. He must have come up from behind like this, put his arm around the boy, and slashed straight across. There's no sign of hesitation. He was probably a professional killer. If that's the case, there's one more person who might have to be shut up, and that's you, Mr. Morimoto."

"Why me?"

Song smiled at him. "Because you're the only one who knows the truth. If Masatake hadn't come here, the body would have been discovered much later. The suspects probably still think that you don't know, Mr. Morimoto. And since you're supposed to be working at the reception desk right now, they'd probably come in through the front entrance to kill you."

Morimoto's small eyes widened. "I thought that only happened in movies."

"Get closer to the body and look closely at the wound. You don't want to end up like that, do you? They say the dead have no mouths, but look, he's got two."

Morimoto clung to Song desperately. "Help me," he pleaded. "I'll do anything."

"I'd like to help you, too."

Kuji looked at Song in bewilderment. It was as if he were a totally different

person.

The three of them emerged from the boiler room to the set of stairs outside. There was a dry area between this building and the building next door which connected to the street. Song took the lead, followed by Morimoto, and Kuji came up from behind.

"Give it until tomorrow until the body's discovered and creates a commotion. If the police get onto it, that'll be good for us," Kuji said under his breath. Song laughed quietly.

"Masatake, you bragged that you'd been in jail and that the yakuza had taken you in as one of theirs. But from my perspective, you're still very much naive. Do you know what the police would do once they find the body? They would fabricate a story to say that the murderer was the guy who used to work in the laundry room - you. You have a criminal history. There's only one thing that wasn't part of their plan, and that was the fact that you have me as a friend."

"Who are you, really?" Morimoto asked in place of Kuji.

"Shh!" Song hushed them with his hand. "There's a chance that the men who killed Ogura might come back."

There was no one at the entrance of the building when they arrived. The three men stayed in the same file as they headed toward the car. The minivan emerged in the dark. Kuji sighed in relief. But just then, he saw two shadows near the car. Beneath the bright streetlights, he could see that they were wearing familiar blue uniforms and sashes. They were traffic enforcement officers.

"Excuse me, we'll be on our way, soon," Kuji called loudly, taking one step forward. The two men turned around. Just as Kuji opened his mouth to speak again, the two raised their arms at the same time. They were each holding

something that looked all too familiar.

Kuji was stunned. Just then, he heard a dull sound like that of a string ripping. Then, another. The two men in front of them had holes in their foreheads. They crumpled into a heap on the road without another word.

He had no idea what had just happened. He whipped around to see Song looking as cool as a cucumber with a silencer-equipped gun in his hand.

"You're naive, Masatake," he said quietly, putting the gun away in his jacket. "What would they be doing, enforcing parking violations at this hour of the night?"

The man was right. Kuji looked down at the fallen men.

"Police uniforms are hard to come by. They made a good choice of disguise, but you could also say that they're unfamiliar with how things work in Japan. But they were good enough to fool someone like you, Masatake."

"Who the hell are you?" Morimoto asked again, but Song approached the two fallen men without answering him.

"We have no time, but we'll have to make do. Our Father, which art in heaven..." After Song finished his quick prayer, he opened the door to the minivan.

"Get on. Quickly."

Morimoto dove into the rear seat.

"Masatake, you, too. Hurry up."

"But these guys..." Kuji pointed at the two bodies on the ground.

"Leave them. Their friends will come and clean them up. If they've got smarts enough to procure police uniforms, they're probably competent to a degree."

Kuji climbed into the passenger seat and glared at Song.

"Who the hell are you?"

"I am a Catholic priest."

"You killed those people."

Song sighed and put the key in the ignition. "I won't try to make excuses by saying I had no choice. But as you can see from their methods, they're cruel and cold-blooded. I did this to protect everyone else. And if we can apprehend Morimoto here, we might still be able to help Yoshida."

"I see..." If Yoshida was still in the country, Kuji thought.

"It was a pity what happened to Ogura. If only we'd acted sooner. But, what's more important at the moment is..." Song turned around to check behind him. Morimoto was as still as a mouse in the back seat. "Where would be a safe place to take him? We can take him to the police, but we have no proof."

Just as the minivan engine roared to life and lurched into motion, Kuji's cell phone rang.

"Hello?" Kuji answered.

He was greeted by Nango's voice. "You fucking idiot!" he yelled. "What the hell have you gotten yourself into, you fag? Your job was to get fucked in the ass, and that was all you should have settled for!"

"Nango, why..."

"You retard. Why did you think I gave you a new cell phone? I get to listen in on all of your calls now. It's GPS equipped, too. Ever thought about that?"

"So that means... everything I said back there, you heard...? About those two being killed?"

"You're damn right, I did. That's why I'm calling, you idiot."

Song kept one hand on the steering wheel and reached out toward Kuji with the other. "Pass that to me, please."

Kuji passed the phone to him, which Song wedged between his shoulder and neck as he spoke into it quietly. "Hello, Mr. Nango, or whoever this is. Please lead us to somewhere safe. Thank you for getting in touch. You're a great help."

"You're the last person I want to be thanked by, all right? Give the phone back to him. He can navigate."

Kuji took the cell phone back from Song and orally passed on the instructions that Nango said into his ear. The car wove through the nighttime streets.

Nango's instructions were short. "Next, turn left," he would say. "Next, right." The car eventually turned off the main road, where there were barely any more oncoming cars. It took a while for Kuji to notice that Song was muttering something under his breath. He listened carefully. It was a Bible passage.

"Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy lovingkindness: according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I acknowledge my transgressions: and my sin is ever before me. Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight..."

Song wore a tense expression on his face as he looked before him. He barely blinked; he only occasionally closed his eyes as if in prayer.

“Who are you? Where did you come from? Why do you have a gun?” A jumble of questions sprung up and crowded Kuji's mind, but he could not bring himself to interrupt Song while he recited Bible verses to himself.

The car pulled to a stop in front of a residential house. It was within

Metropolitan Tokyo, but Kuji wasn't sure of the exact address. There were no streetlights around, and it was pitch black. The house was unremarkable and ordinary-looking. In front of the gate stood Nango and another uniformed police officer.

"Hurry up and get out," Nango ordered. The three of them exited the car. "This is where we shelter important witnesses," Nango explained. "Kuji and that other guy - Morimoto? You guys will be assigned protection."

Nango made a shooing motion with his hand toward Song. "You get out of here immediately. Our nation's laws can't protect you."

Song bowed his head. "I understand. Please take care of the both of them. Especially Masatake."

"What the hell do you mean?" Kuji said, looking back and forth between Song and Nango. The two men ignored him.

"Masatake is a very honest and good young man. He's been a great help."

"I'm sure he has. He's made himself useful to me, too. In a lot of ways. I give him a good time for what he does. Doing what you can't do."

Kuji flushed in anger at Nango's snide remark. "Nango!" he snapped.

Nango grabbed Kuji's arm as if to tell him to shut up. Song smiled as he looked on.

"Mr. Nango, isn't it time that you set Masatake free?"

Nango shook his head. "Nope. This guy's useful. Can't let him go."

"I see," Song smiled again. "Masatake, he must cherish you well. If so, that's fine."

¼ŠCherish? Are you kidding me?¼Š Kuji almost retorted, but when he saw

Song heading back to the car, he shook free of Nango's hand. He sprinted around to the passenger's side.

"Where're you going?"

"Now that I've delivered you in safe hands, my job is done. I'm going back to where I belong. To my church." Song climbed into the driver's seat and looked at Kuji. "Now, be a good boy and stay there."

"Wait!" Kuji protested desperately. "I wanted to ask you - did you know I was a spy?"

Song smiled and shook his head. "I didn't. You've always been my dear Masatake. You are, always have been, and always will be."

Morimoto disappeared into the house, accompanied by police officers. Kuji went in after him, being half-dragged along by Nango. With a roar of the engine, the minivan drove off.

"Goodbye."

Those were the last words that Song had left him.

Upon entering the house, Morimoto and Kuji were separated. Morimoto was taken to the second floor, and Kuji to the first. Nango took Kuji to a small Western-style room. It was about eighty square feet, with a student's desk and bed. In a regular household, this would be the child's room.

"Sit down."

Kuji sat down on the bed and looked up at Nango, who was standing in front of him with his feet set apart.

"Nango, who is Song, really? Why did you say that you couldn't protect him?"

Nango didn't answer his question, but instead folded his arms. "This turf belongs to Metropolitan Police jurisdiction. I've got no power here."

"Metropolitan Police? What's the case about?"

"No idea." Nango reached out and grabbed a fistful of Kuji's hair.

"Ow!" Kuji protested.

"Shut up! Thanks to you, we're in a pretty little mess. I had to beg to be allowed in here, all right? Not to mention having to put up with people commenting on what an idiot pet I had for an S."

"I don't care about that. Tell me about Song."

"And I'll take that question and throw it right back at ya, idiot. I thought he was supposed to be a priest?"

Kuji shook his head. "No priest would murder someone, would they?" he lifted his gaze to search Nango's expression. "I feel so stupid," he muttered to himself. "It's his fault. He got me in the mood because he was putting on an act of being prim and proper. But he's exactly like the rest."

Kuji's voice then took on a sugary tone. "Nango," he said. "That really scared me back there... but you saved me."

"I told you not to stick your nose into stupid things."

"You were right." Kuji reached out and lowered Nango's fly. He slipped his hands into the man's pants and groped his crotch. "You like my fingers, too, don't you?"

Nango gave him a contemptuous smile. "What? Horny?"

"Yeah, kinda. My heart is all racing and stuff. You know... the smell of blood.

It can be a turn-on."

"That's right." Nango's penis was already hard. Kuji pulled it out and put the tip of it into his mouth.

"So what is it with that guy, huh?" Kuji said, running his tongue over and along the man's penis and speaking in between. "You said he was a sleeper for the North, but you were wrong."

"I'm not the one who came up with the idea," Nango said between heavy breaths as he pushed Kuji's head into his crotch.

"Use your throat," he commanded as he grabbed a fistful of hair and pushed him away. Kuji's mouth came away from the man's penis.

"Did someone tip you off?" Kuji asked.

"Not sure if you can call it a tip. People from the South told us to keep watch on him." Nango then pushed Kuji's face against his crotch again. Kuji let the man's penis penetrate deep into his throat before puckering his lips.

North and South. He knew nothing about the countries. He only knew that they were opposing enemies. But Song was not someone from the North. Why had people from the South passed on wrong information? In doing so, they had sold out one of their own.

Kuji was still in thought when Nango forcibly pushed his head away again. Kuji's puckered mouth ran along the length of his penis.

"Yeah, that's it. Keep it coming." The man shoved Kuji's head into his crotch again. Kuji almost choked as he swallowed the man's penis.

Every time he latched onto the member, he was grabbed by the hair and pulled away, then forced to bury his face into the man's crotch again. Nango grabbed both of his ears and repeatedly pushed and pulled his head against his groin.

Kuji pumped the man's rearing penis with his mouth.

Nango eventually picked Kuji up and made him sit on the desk. He pulled Kuji's pants off, grabbed his ankles, and hoisted them over his shoulders.

"Now I'll give you some cock."

"Give it to me, Nango," Kuji said in an imploring tone. Once the man was inside of him, he made a point of thrusting back and letting out exaggerated moans. Kuji built up pleasure while his thoughts raced in his mind.

Why hadn't Nango let Song into the house? Because Song was not of Japanese nationality. Therefore the Metropolitan Police had no obligation to protect him. But was Song really a spy for the North, as the people from the South had said in their tip?

No - if he was a spy from the North, he would not try to report crime and cooperate with the police - he would end up blowing his cover that way. If that was the case, Kuji thought, perhaps he was someone from the South. But then why had the people from the South tipped the police off that way? Why had they ratted out one of their own?

Kuji's speculations were taking him nowhere. Was Song even a priest in the first place? Never. A priest would never kill another man. Kuji stopped thinking once he got that far, and pushed Song into the back of his mind and decided to savor the member inside of him.

He had to climax once, or else Nango would get suspicious.

"Ahhh, I'm coming, Nango-!" Kuji let out an ecstatic moan as he released his milky white desire. He clenched around Nango and twisted his hips.

"Ngh-" Nango let out a short grunt and paused.

"Come on, give me more. I've been deprived here." Kuji purposely put on a

coquettish act. "I dunno why I ever thought Song was a good idea," he continued. "A man who can't fuck isn't a man. I wouldn't be able to do without your cock, Nango."

Nango laughed as he began to thrust again. "That's kind of cute, isn't it? I hope you're not going to stop doing that after tonight?"

Eventually Nango detached himself and took out a cigarette from his jacket. He walked over to the bed and sat down. Kuji slid off the desk and lay down on the floor. He turned his face to Nango and put a hand to his bare crotch.

"Look how full my belly is. It's sloshing around."

Nango laughed. He looked at Kuji, seemingly in good spirits. "You asked for it."

Kuji kept his hand on his belly. "I feel like I'm gonna wet myself," he whimpered pitifully. "Can I get it out?"

"Yeah. The bathroom's that way."

Kuji pulled up his pants and looked to the door that Nango was pointing at with his cigarette. The guards were on the lookout for external dangers, and were not expecting people to leave the premises. Escaping through the bathroom window was a piece of cake for Kuji.

Although he felt a twinge of guilt for doing this to Nango, he figured he had already paid his dues by giving the man a good time.

He had left his leather jacket behind, but the cold was of no consequence to him. In jail, he had endured the cold with nothing but a shirt. He remembered hearing that Song's birthplace, Cheon-wang, was close to China. Was it cold there?

Although Kuji did not mind the cold, he regretted not being able to bring his shoes. But there was nothing he could do about it. He hoped he would make it to Roppongi somehow.

Once he made it to a highway, he would hitchhike a ride with a truck. Kuji lapsed into thought as he continued to walk. He had to go back to Song. That was where he belonged.

"Goodbye," Song had said when they parted. Was he going somewhere far away? Or perhapsâ€”

A chill ran down his spine. *Never.* Kuji gave himself a shake to ward away the foreboding feeling that had come over him. He knew that God did not exist. If He did, He would have granted his wish already.

What's my wish, you ask? To get together with Song and have sex every day, what else would I wish for? No. That wasn't it. Song did not engage in sex, and Kuji knew that thing would work out so conveniently in his favor. All he wished for was to play the organ beside Song. He remembered what the man had said - that abstaining from sex wasn't hard if he thought of the person who had saved his life.

I wouldn't mind not having sex if I could be with Song. If he was told never to have sex again for the rest of his life, he would comply. If asked to show proof, he wouldn't mind cutting off his penis and balls.

Now I know.

O God, please. If you really do exist, please hear me out - I'll give up what's important to me if you'll grant my wish in exchange. You're accepting of everyone, aren't you, no matter how defiled they are?

I've found Song. He's the path that I should follow.

Humming that familiar song calmed his heart.

Kuji pressed onwards.

Chapter 7

Song was on his knees in the chapel. Instead of his robes, he was wearing a black jacket and a black shirt. When Kuji came in, he stood up and gave him a concerned look.

"Masatake, I told you not to come back."

Kuji strode up to him. "Who are you?" he asked. "I came because I wanted to know about you. And I'm going to stay until you tell me."

Song sighed as he took Kuji's hand and sat him down on the pew. Kuji stared at Song's profile. Song's eyes were fixed on the cross in front of him.

"My real name is Yeong-Il. The Chinese character for Yeong is part of the Japanese word 'forever', and Il is used in the word 'moral duty'."

"Yeong-Il," Kuji repeated under his breath. "So you're not someone from the North? Nango said people from the South tipped them off that you were."

"That must be why you were keeping watch on me."

Kuji nodded. "I was happy when they told me to keep tabs on you. I liked you ever since I first met you." Kuji surprised himself at how fluidly the embarrassing confession slipped out of his mouth. "I know I sound like a high schooler, but it's true."

Song reached out and grasped his hand. Kuji squeezed it back. "I stabbed my dad. I was seventeen then. He was drunk and was raping my little sister. I didn't

do it to help her - I did it because I really wanted to kill him then. I hated him. That wasn't the first time he'd raped her, either. So I stabbed him. Over and over, from behind. I was told that the way I did it was cruel. It's true. I don't regret it, and I certainly don't plan on atoning for it. I didn't tell anyone about my sister. Maybe if I did, they would have pitied me and I wouldn't have had to go to jail."

He felt Song squeeze his hand harder, and Kuji gave a loud laugh to show him that he was fine.

"It was the shits after that. But that was how I was able to meet you. So maybe it was all for the better. You were the only one who accepted me." Lastly, he said, "I love you."

Song took his eyes off the cross to look at him. "I'm not the kind of noble person you imagine me to be," he said. "I've committed many more heinous crimes than you have."

"I don't care. You even said so yourself - God loves any kind of person. God will love both of us, won't He? That means we're the same in His eyes, right?"

"Your logic is very spot-on sometimes, Masatake," Song said with the same quiet smile as always. "All right, then, let me tell you my story."

Masatake, I am someone who does not exist. As you know, my home country has a conscription system, and all adult males are fingerprinted and registered. But there is no record of me in my country.

When I joined the army, my physical abilities were a head above the rest. I was recognized for that and was transferred into a special unit. At the time, relations between the North and the South were poor, and I was full of

nationalist pride. I was eventually assigned to a unit that undertook particularly special missions even within the special unit. Actually, I wasn't assigned - I volunteered because that team was going to infiltrate the North and assassinate its dictator.

All records of the people who joined the assassination squad were obliterated. This was so that if any of us were caught captive, the government could deny its involvement. We were told not to return alive. We were elated; we trained diligently every day to execute this important mission.

Our camp was in the mountains close to the national border. Our training regime was very arduous, but that was where I learned and acquired the skills to kill people in all manner of ways. I believed that the sacrifice of my own life would help build the foundations of my own country.

But there came a great change in politics. Due to a change in the ruling political party, my country's policy was now leaning towards a harmonious relationship with the North. We were told by our seniors that the unit would be dissolved. After leaving the unit, we were to resume our lives as ordinary citizens. But that was a lie; we were actually scheduled to be erased.

One day, we were taken into the mountains in the name of training. In actuality, we were to be shot. I as well as a few others were able to escape in the nick of time. But as deserters, we were now being sought after. We crossed the border in order to survive.

Little did I know that it was the gate to an entirely new kind of Hell.

Song let go of Kuji's hand. He clasped his hands together and closed his eyes. He muttered a prayer under his breath.

The concentration camp was grueling. Less than a year had passed before I was the only one who remained alive. But I still lived through it. My desire to exact revenge on the country that had betrayed us kept me going. I lived on in hatred. In darkness.

One year, we were met with a harsher winter than any we had experienced in the past. We were sent out into the blizzard to gather tree bark. Of course, to use as food. I took advantage of one fleeting chance to escape. No one came after me - they probably thought I wouldn't survive.

But I was saved, by a certain Song Jin-Il. He was a priest affiliated to Emmaus, and he had working at the border helping refugees. A few times he had even risked his life to come to Cheon-wang.

I passed the winter under Song's protection. When spring came and I tried to cross the border, I was caught and chased. Song risked his life to save me. Song gave me a new life; I, Song Jin-Il, was born that day in Cheon-wang.

"Is that why you took the same name as him?"

Song smiled serenely again. "It was convenient for me to cover up my identity, of course. But I took his name in order to live as him. We passed the winter in a frugal hut made of piled stones, where he taught me about God's love. I'd been blinded by hatred, but I was able to see the light again."

"So then why would the South... why would your own country rat you out?" Kuji asked.

"Probably because letting me live would have negative consequences for their new political policy of harmony - it's the same reason why they tried to

obliterate our unit. I'm a living witness. And in the course of my training, I've killed many people. I've committed a sin that I can't even begin atoning for. But, as I said, my personal information has been erased completely, and I'm a person that doesn't exist on paper. Whoever suspects that I'm Yeong-Il probably isn't sure of it themselves."

Kuji could finally begin to see the picture. The Southerners must have figured that if Song wasn't from the South, he would be from the North. If someone from the North was seen getting in touch with Song, that would confirm their suspicions. If he was from the North, he wouldn't be Yeong-Il. That was why they had tipped off Public Safety and made them keep surveillance on Song.

"And what if they find out you're Yeong-Il?"

"Then, they'll probably try to wipe me out for sure this time."

Kuji stood up from the pew noisily. "Then you shouldn't even be here! It's dangerous! We gotta get away!"

Song shook his head slowly. "Once they find out who I am, it's impossible. My DNA and fingerprints will be registered anew, and they'll chase me to the ends of the Earth. It would be easy for them to make me the perpetrator of a murder I didn't commit."

A sudden realization dawned on Kuji. "It's my fault," he said softly. "It's because I got myself involved in this mess. You tried to help me, and ended up...."

Song shook his head. "No. It's true that I wanted to help you, but in truth I also wanted to help the missing young people. Under no circumstance should the country be allowed to snatch the future away from young people. That applies to this country, too, as well as my own."

Song remained seated as he reached out to take Kuji's hand, pressing it to his cheek.

"Masatake, this country is wrong for treating young people like you in the unfair way it has. But hatred takes light away. I know you've been through a very painful ordeal, but I want you to abandon your hatred and move on."

"I don't hate anyone anymore," Kuji said. "It's because I fell in love with you." He pulled out the gun he had hidden underneath the waistband of his pants. "Now it's my turn to protect you," he said.

"That's mine," Song said, widening his eyes.

"I sneaked into your room. I'm sorry."

"Don't. Give that back," Song said firmly. Kuji brushed the man's hand away and took a step back.

"Are they gonna come right away?"

"Who knows? They likely expect me to try to make a run for it. They'll probably come as early as tonight to finish me off." Song abruptly looked around him.

"What? What's wrong?"

"I hear a car. It's probably them. Masatake, you have to leave this place right now. You're not part of this."

Kuji held the gun in both hands and bent his knees slightly, getting ready to shoot. "I have everything to do with this," he said. "You saved me. So in exchange, I'm going to save you this time."

A sudden ringtone sounded, and Song cautiously reached into his jacket to pull out his cell phone.

"Oh, it's you. You'd like to speak to Masatake?"

After a few short words, Song pressed his cell phone to Kuji's ear.

"Hello? Oh, it's you? How the hell do you know this number?"

"You fucking idiot!" barked the person on the other and. "I'm calling from your cell phone. Found this number in your call history. You left your phone with your jacket, remember? Nice job pulling one over on us, you bastard."

"I don't have time to be talking to you," Kuji said testily. Nango apparently sensed that he was going to hang up and roared in response.

"Don't you dare hang up, you fag. I'm calling to say we'll help your boyfriend out."

"My boyfriend? Who're you talking about?"

"Song, you fucking idiot! Jesus, you're such a hopeless fag!"

"I'm not gonna fall for that."

"Just shut up and listen. We got the green light from the Metropolitan Police. Interpol is working with us on this case, too. They said Song is an important witness who needs protection."

Kuji lowered his gun and took the cell phone from Song. "Are you serious? Show me proof."

"I don't have any. You have my word."

"Then it's not happening."

"Fine. In the name of my cock and balls, I give you my solemn vow. If I turn out to be lying, I'll cut them off and give 'em to you."

Kuji laughed himself to tears. "Nango, it looks like you and me both treasure

the same thing over anything else, huh?" he said. After a good bout of laughter, he resumed a serious voice. "Tell me what I need to do," he said.

"Just hang in there until I make it. The guys from the precinct are headed over there right now."

Kuji handed the cell phone back to Song. The man looked at him calmly. "Masatake, I can see that he loves you."

"Don't be stupid," Kuji retorted. "Anyway, he told us to sit tight. The police are coming to help us."

Song took Kuji's hand and walked toward the altar. He stood in front of the cross that was mounted there and made his own cross over his forehead. He turned back to face Kuji,

"Let's barricade the entrance," he said. "If we try to leave now, we'll only be sniped. This is our territory. It's probably best to besiege ourselves here."

At first Kuji thought it would be better to make a run for it, but when he looked around the chapel, he felt like Song had a point. There was only one entrance. There was a small side door behind the altar, but that was connected to the residential quarters, which no one would think of coming through unless they knew the floor plan of the church. The windows were placed high up, and were not large enough for people to climb through. If they piled some benches up in front of the door, they would probably serve as obstacles to hold any intruders off for a while.

"I'm sure they won't be able to let loose with shotguns and light machineguns in a residential neighborhood like this. They would probably have to make do with night-vision and silencer-equipped guns. If so, then we have a chance. If we can fend them off for a few minutes - even ten - we'll be able to make it."

Kuji looked up at Song with an air of fearful awe. "Wow, you really sound like someone from the special forces."

"I told you I was." Song wore the same calm look as he looked at Kuji's hands. "By the way, Masatake, do you know how to fire a gun? Has Nango taught you?"

Kuji shook his head. "I was trained as a spy, but not in weapons, of course. The only teaching I got from Nango was, you know, in bed."

Song shook his head in exasperation and held out his hand. "Give me that. I'll hold onto it."

"But you don't want to kill people, right? You were praying just now."

"Of course I don't want to kill if I can help it. But I've been trained. I can aim for a spot that won't be fatal. Back there I had no choice because it was do or die."

Song took the gun from Kuji and released the safety mechanism with familiar ease.

"Masatake, right now your life is the first thing we have to protect. For the sake of Nango, too."

"What's he got to do with it?" Kuji grumbled, but Song's judgment was sound.

"All right, okay, what should I do?" he asked.

"Let's pile the benches up here. Then we turn off the lights."

"But then we won't be able to see the guys."

"And it'll be the same for them. Besides, I've been trained to apprehend people in low light conditions."

"Wow, you're amazing," Kuji said, impressed.

"I certainly didn't become a priest to receive those kinds of compliments," Song said, looking truly unsure of how to react.

The switch was turned off, and darkness closed in around them. Dim moonlight filtered in through the high windows, but it was enough to discern things by. The two of them crawled across the floor and hid in the shadows of the pulpit. Not even a minute passed before they heard creeping footsteps.

"Here they come," whispered Song, and they heard the doorknob turn as if on cue. The door crept open and immediately hit the barricade. There was a pause before the door burst open forcefully. The benches toppled over noisily, but that was all part of the plan. The intruders had now scattered obstacles all over the floor for themselves. They no longer had the option of laying down flat and crawling along the floor.

"They're probably wearing infrared goggles, so they'll be able to see us," Song whispered at his ear again. He felt something hard being pressed into his hand.

"It's a knife we use to cut the bread for sacraments. It's small, but it's better than nothing. Keep it with you."

Kuji nodded without a word. If they could see in the dark, it was probably a good idea.

They heard something creak.

"One of them is trying to climb over the bench."

Kuji sensed Song moving. The next moment, he heard a muted bang as fire spewed from the barrel of a gun. A cry of surprise rose as the bench groaned loudly.

"I shot him in the right shoulder. Given him the message that he's out of the

game."

"You shot at him already?"

"It's our way of expressing our intent. I had no choice," the man answered. "I gave him a warning. This is my way of telling them I'm not looking for bloodshed. I gave him time to turn back."

"And are they going to?"

"I hope so."

The wounded enemy seemed to be making his way out through the door. The benches scraped noisily. But soon afterwards, there was a loud screech of something being dragged. The enemy was clearing the obstacles on the floor.

"It looks like my warning backfired. Now they know that I won't shoot indiscriminately."

"What do you mean?"

"He's clearing an opening so that the rest of them can breach it and fan out on each side. But we'll be able to buy ourselves some time while they clear the barricade."

He was right, Kuji thought as he strained his ears. The neighborhood was quiet and not a sound could be heard.

"Who knew the day would come when I'd be waiting to hear police sirens," he said. Although Nango had promised he was coming, Kuji wondered if he really would.

"We only have a while to wait until dawn. Let's hang in there," Song said encouragingly. Kuji nodded again. The scraping ceased. It looked like the enemy had finished taking the obstacles outside. There was a rustling sound.

"Keep your head low," Song said. Kuji got down on the floor. The pulpit was elevated from the floor, and although they had built a barricade around it, one could say that their position made them an easy target.

Something whistled through the air.

"What was that?"

"Shh," Song hissed. Simultaneously, they were hit by an impact from three sides. A dull blast sounded as wood debris scattered through the air. The impacts came in succession. One of the piled benches blew apart.

For the first time, Kuji felt fear well up inside him. This was something he had never experienced. This was a warzone.

The shooting stopped and they heard footsteps clambering on the floor. The enemy was approaching.

"Masatake, listen carefully," said Song's calm voice. "It'll be hard even for me to fend off an enemy that's coming at us from three sides. I'm going to lure their attention, and while they're distracted, I want you to take that side door to get outside. Run as far away as you can from the church."

"No," Kuji shot back immediately. In the dark, he saw another flare burst from the barrel of the gun. The momentary glow illuminated Song's profile.

"That's the only way for both of us to make it. There's a better chance of surviving than waiting for the police to come. And if you live, you'll be able to call for help. It'll increase my chances of making it out alive, too."

As much as Kuji wanted to refuse, he had to admit that Song was right. It was easier to protect one person than two.

"All right."

"I'll count. On three, go through the side door." With that, Song disappeared from his side instantly. Kuji's palms broke out into sweat.

"One, two, three!" Song rose up and opened fire. Kuji jumped back, crouched, and slipped through the side door. He emerged in the hallway of the first floor, and continued sprinting to the kitchen. He had never planned on abandoning Song in the first place. Kuji wasted no time in grabbing the metal tin of kerosene that was sitting beside the kerosene heater. He scrambled out the back door, hoisted the tin over his shoulder, and ran to the front of the church.

This was the only way. He was certain. *Sorry, God. I'm gonna have to burn your house down. But you'll forgive me, right? It's to help Song, after all. Song said you'd forgive anything.*

If he started a fire, it would draw out people from the neighborhood. These special unit guys, or assassins, or whoever they were, would have to give up on trying to kill them. Kuji splashed kerosene over the benches that had been dragged outside. He took a few steps back, took off his shirt, and poured kerosene over it, too. He then took a lighter out of his pants pocket. Just as he was about to set everything alight, he felt an impact jar him from behind.

"What...the..." Kuji looked over his shoulder to see a man standing behind him, dressed head-to-toe in black. Kuji's eyes registered the gun in his hand. Before he could realize he had been shot, he took another bullet and fell to his knees. The ground slowly rose up to meet him.

Kuji still managed to light his lighter and set his shirt on fire. Although he had no strength left to hurl the shirt at the debris, he grasped it tightly and crawled his way toward the church building. The flames crept to his hair and his pants.

This is it, this is good enough, Kuji thought as he threw himself at the bench, doused in kerosene.

"Holy shit, you fucking faggot."

Kuji tried to open his eyes at the familiar voice, but lacking the strength, he soon gave up. He felt like he had something very important to say, but he couldn't remember. He heard many voices coming from far away. He heard the familiar sound of sirens. His body felt leaden, and he felt like the core of his brain had gone numb.

"What? Can't hear me, idiot?"

It's Nango Kuji thought. He simultaneously remembered the most important thing on his mind.

"How's Song?"

"Safe, you dumbass. We've rescued him."

"Good." That was all he needed to hear. He smiled. Nango's voice rained down on him from above again.

"Open your eyes, damnit! You've still got work left to do for us as an S, you hear me? The ambulance is on its way."

I wish I could open my eyes, but I can't, he wanted to say.

"Mr. Nango, Masatake needs me. Please let me be by his side," he heard Song's quiet voice say.

"Where are you?" Kuji asked. "It's so dark - I can't see."

"I'm right here." Someone gripped his hand with large, warm, and familiar palms.

"Masatake, I want you to listen carefully to what I'm going to say. And I want you to repeat after me. Got it?"

What?

"Our Father, which art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come..." Song was praying. *Does that mean I'm going to die? Oh, well. I guess it's all good, since Song is safe. God must have saved him. Thanks, man. I don't believe in you, but if Song does, there's nothing I can do. I guess the least I can do is thank you.*

God, huh. I wonder what he looks like. If I die, would I get to meet him? Hey, I should ask.

"Can I go to the kingdom of God?"

"You can."

"And so will you, right?"

"Yes, perhaps."

"Then, if I wait over there, I'll be able to see you again, right?" That was all he wanted to make sure. "Will you pray for me?"

"I will." The hands clasped tightly around his own. A dazzling light appeared in the darkness that had surrounded him. He heard that song - the song he had so loved.

Chapter 8

He felt a presence in the darkness. His whole body ached, but Kuji took it as proof that he was alive. He suddenly felt someone's hand grasp his own. It wasn't the hand that he was expecting, but it was soft and warm.

"Masatake, Masatake," a tearful voice reached his ear.

"You must be kidding me...." Kuji muttered.

"Big brother, don't die," followed his younger sister's voice. He had not heard her voice in years.

"Why? What are you doing here...?"

There was no answer to Kuji's question. He descended again into the chaos of his consciousness. From time to time, he regained consciousness, and each time, his mother called his name. Gradually, he was able to linger in reality for a little longer.

One day, Kuji felt his body being lifted up and moved by many nurses.

"We're moving you from the ICU into a regular patient room," said a nurse cheerfully. It finally sunk in for Kuji that he had made it out alive. His face was still covered in bandages and he couldn't see a thing, but every day his mother's voice filled the room in which he had settled. One by one, the many tubes that had been inserted into his body were removed.

He was given permission to eat, and his mother fed him rice porridge with a spoon like she would a baby. And the next day, Nango's voice boomed in his hospital room.

"You sure had luck on your side, huh, faggot?"

Kuji's sense of hearing was sharper now that he had lost his vision. He began to laugh at Nango's voice.

"What? What's so funny, you fag?"

"Nango, you're crying, aren't you? Your voice is shaking."

He heard a click of the tongue, and felt a large, rugged hand grab his jaw.

"Don't make me fuck you, you bastard."

"I'd like to see you try," Kuji retorted, but his body tensed in anticipation of the violence to come. But the hand fell away from his jaw, and gently stroked his cheek instead.

"Nango, were you the one that told my mom..."

"Yeah."

Kuji had always assumed that even if his life was in danger, his family would not come to see him. After he regained consciousness, he expected them to treat him like a burden again once they found out that he had survived. But it was not so.

"You were doing good things, weren't you," his mother had said while she cared for him. "I'm sorry. I thought you were off with bad friends again. I heard the whole story. You were putting your life on the line to work for the police. And all in secrecy, too."

Being a spy was far from "doing good" in Kuji's opinion, but it was all good if

it meant his mother had forgiven him.

"Yuka?" he called his younger sister's name.

"Big brother," a tearful voice piped up from a short distance away. "Big brother, Kazu and I, we'll give you our skin. As much as you need. You helped me. I don't know why I never thanked you for it."

Kuji felt tears fall from his unseeing eyes.

"Don't be stupid," he growled. He sniffled as he remembered what had happened that day. "Nango, don't go telling them things they don't need to know."

"Your voice is shaking too, idiot." The man's large hand moved to his head and gave it a pat.

"Is, um..." Kuji began.

"I know what you want to ask," Nango interrupted him. "But I can't tell you where he is."

Song had never visited once. Even if Kuji had not heard his voice, he could still sense the man's existence. As long as Song was alive somewhere, Kuji was happy. Judging by the way Nango phrased his words, the man was, indeed, alive.

"That's all right," Kuji said quietly, placing his bandaged hands over his chest.

He lost track of the time that passed. Kuji's knees remained bent due to the contracted skin from his severe burns, but after going through grafting surgery several times, he was able to move a lot more freely. Rehabilitation began, which was much more arduous than his surgery. But Kuji diligently followed the physiotherapist's instructions without uttering a single complaint.

His mother and younger sister visited almost every day. His younger brother could only visit once a month since he had graduated high school and found work in Osaka. But the time that the four of them spent together made him feel as if the warmth had returned to their family.

Just once, his mother's second husband came to visit.

"You must be Masatake," the man had said, offering his hand for a shake. Kuji felt the man's large and rugged hand. It felt different from his own hand, Nango's hand, and Song's hand. But he knew that this was the hand that had supported his mother and little sister.

By some miracle, Kuji's fingers had been spared with just minor burns, and he eagerly awaited the day that he would be able to play the organ again. But unfortunately, his eyes only recovered enough to vaguely sense light. But Kuji had nothing to despair about.

As long as he's alive, there's nothing more I could ask for. Even if he could not see the man, he would not mind. He only considered himself a by-product of his circumstances.

I just happened to make it out alive.

Despite the astonishing events he had gone through, he hadn't died. Perhaps that was the nature of human life. *And that makes me super lucky to be here.*

He was alive, and so was his most cherished person. Not to mention his fingers were safe, so he could still play the organ. There was a piano in the rehabilitation room, so one day Kuji got his physiotherapist to give him permission to play it.

Even if he could not see, his fingers still remembered where the keys were. With his index finger, Kuji pressed the C key on the C major scale, and from

there his hands moved on their own and began to play that song.

Song had been playing it when they first met. It had been the first song that the man had taught him. Kuji felt his senses become sharper as he played, and he could feel the presence of the people gathering around him in the rehabilitation room. When the song ended, there was a burst of applause. Kuji sensed someone stand up close to him, but it was not Song.

"That was incredible, Kuji," said the voice of his doctor. "I suppose you want to play for a little more. Once you're done, there's something I want to discuss with you."

Kuji turned away from the organ and looked up at his doctor.

"What is it? I want to hear about it right away," he said.

The doctor had wanted to discuss the possibility of undergoing a cornea transplant. "You can register with an eye bank and wait for your turn to come around. You're eligible for state redress, so you may be bumped up the line, too."

For reasons that he still didn't know, Kuji had been awarded the qualification of a government official, and had been promoted two classes up on top of that. His medical fees would be waived, and he would also receive a disability pension. Kuji decided to accept the windfall gladly, considering all of the hardship he had endured until now. But the term "bumped up" bothered him.

"You mean someone else is going to get pushed down the queue because of me, right?"

"I didn't mean it like that, but I'm sorry if I made you feel that way," said the doctor.

Kuji had harbored a vague sense that he would never see Song again. And if

he wasn't going to see the man's face ever again, he didn't mind losing his vision forever. But one day he would have to be discharged from this hospital. That was why, in the end, Kuji decided to take the doctor's advice.

His long days of rehabilitation began again. Nango came occasionally, had casual chats with him, and left. During these conversations, Nango let slip subtle pieces of information, and Kuji was able to deduce that Interpol was on the hunt for criminals involved in the organ trade. Song had been secretly gathering information about missing persons from Emmaus and other NPOs all over the world and reporting them to Interpol. He had been a very important informant.

"I remember hearing something like that," Kuji said. "When we were heading over to Asylum Net."

“Yeah,” Nango said. “The organization that Interpol was after was based out of Southeast Asia. The Japanese yakuza were also involved, too. They've sent people from "[Fourth Division](#)" over there, too.”

And what about Song? Kuji seemed to say as he lifted his face. Nango wore a reluctant look as he turned to the window.

"...I can't tell you that right now."

Kuji took that as a sign that Nango would tell him someday. He also turned his face to the window and felt the gentle rays of the sun on his face. *I'll wait*, he thought.

That night, he was met with an unexpected visit.

It was after lights-out. Kuji opened his eyes, sensing a man's presence in the dark room. It was Song. But Kuji's vision was only good enough to sense strong

light. He reached out and felt for the light switch of his bed head lamp. A warm hand stopped him. It was the familiar touch from long ago.

"S-Song, it's you!" Kuji exclaimed as he felt along the hand that clasped his. He ran his hands up the man's wrist and arm, grabbed a handful of the crisp fabric of his shirt and tried to draw him close. But the man stood like a stone and did not budge.

"Song! Song!" Kuji continued to cry until Song's palm covered his mouth.

"Masatake, please. Quiet down," said Song's voice at his ear. Kuji felt tears well up and stream from his eyes. As he sobbed, a sturdy arm wound around his head.

"I'm sorry. I wanted to visit you sooner, but there were a lot of things I had to sort out."

"It's okay," Kuji said as he pressed his face into the man's chest. "I thought I'd only get to see you in God's kingdom."

A large palm stroked his head. "Thank you for saving my life," Song said.

"It's no big deal. It's what I wanted to do. And I'm happy I did."

"But look at what you've sustained because of me. I'm sorry," Song said quietly as he cupped Kuji's face with his hands.

"It's nothing to be sorry about," Kuji said. He felt the other man's warm breath on his face.

"I've already given my body and soul to the priest who saved me at the border," said Song. "There's nothing left that I can give to you to make up for it, Masatake. I'm sorry."

"I told you it's okay," Kuji insisted. "I've already gotten lots from you already."

"Masatake," he heard the man murmur. The next moment, he felt something soft press against his lips. Startled, he shrank back. The soft sensation quickly drew away, and the man's presence left him. Abandoned in the darkness, Kuji wept silently.

I'll probably never see him again.

It wasn't a vague premonition; Kuji was certain that it was true.

[Fourth Division](#) The Fourth Division of the Japanese police presides over organized crime (including gangs, trading of weapons and drugs, and foreign criminals).

Chapter 9

Shortly after that, Kuji was informed by his doctor that the eye bank had been in touch. He underwent a cornea transplant, recovered from his operation as scheduled, and before long the day came when he could take off his bandages.

"Open your eyes slowly. It might be a little bright, but it'll be all right."

The low voice was accompanied by a blinding light that filled his vision. He had unconsciously been gripping his eye mask. He blinked several times, and stared at the blurry figure in front of him. His vision came into focus and he could distinguish the person's face. There was a man in a lab coat in front of him, and someone else standing at his side.

"I suppose I should apologize for being the first thing you see," said Nango. Although his tone was brusque, his face was solemn. "Your mother, she's with your sister because she's at risk for miscarriage. Your brother's busy at the factory and says he can't come into town unless it's on the weekends."

"That's fine," Kuji said. "It helps more to see someone who's familiar." He blinked a few times before turning to his doctor and bowing his head. "Thanks, doctor."

For the first time, he could see the doctor who had supported him throughout the long journey of his recovery. He was a kind-looking middle-aged gentleman. Kuji wondered how happy he would have been if the man had been his father.

Nango approached and placed a hand on his head. "Good job for making it

this far," he murmured.

"It's no big deal," Kuji said. "You know, I figured you and me, we're alive because we happened to get lucky. And that's enough to be thankful about."

The hand on his head lifted.

"It's funny, hearing someone like you talk about getting lucky." Nango's tone was gentle in spite of his brash remark. "So, what are you gonna do now?" he asked, after the doctor had excused himself from the room.

"I'll live apart from my mom and sister. Being the bad guy that I really am, you know."

Nango's eyes bulged. "You're not telling me you're...."

"No, stupid, I'm too old to be dicking around," Kuji retorted. "I'm going to become an organist."

"Good," Nango said brusquely, turning aside. "I have one more thing to tell you," he said. Nango went on to say that Song had been placed under protection as an important witness, and had been granted a pardon from the president of his country. His life was no longer in danger. Nango added one last message at the end.

"This is the last time I'll ever see you."

It was Kuji's third summer after that night, and the day after being discharged from the hospital, he was headed towards the certain church in Roppongi. It looked much the same as it had before. The gate and entrance were new; Kuji supposed it was because they had burned down that night.

The door was flung open much in the same way as it had when Song was here. Kuji stepped inside. When he approached the organ, he was greeted by an elderly priest who appeared from the back. The top of his head was balding like a friar, and he was wearing round spectacles.

"Um, is it okay if I play the organ?" Kuji asked.

"Please go ahead. But avoid pop and rock if you can," said the priest, his eyes crinkling in a gentle smile. Kuji, of course, played that song.

I once was lost but now am found,

Was blind, but now I see.

When Kuji finished playing, the elderly priest gave a loud clap.

"Um, would it be all right if I came to play once in a while?" Kuji asked hesitantly. The priest nodded.

"I don't play very well myself. I'm sure the organ would appreciate it."

After that, Kuji came to the church every Sunday to play the organ at Mass. When the elderly priest spotted members of the congregation saying, "Welcome back," to Kuji, he brought in linens to the attic room so that Kuji could stay there. Kuji decided to accept the man's gracious gesture.

The end of summer was followed with a hasty progression from autumn to winter, and once spring came and went, it was summer again. That was when Kuji received a letter.

There was a newspaper clipping in the envelope and nothing else. It was a

regional paper from Nagasaki Prefecture. The article was circled with a red pen, and beside it was a familiar scrawl that read, "You can thank me later for it, you fag."

The article itself was small, and simply stated that there was a blind priest who gave Mass to the elderly on a small island in the Goto Islands archipelago of Nagasaki Prefecture.

The ocean of the Goto Islands shone beautifully like emeralds, and the sunlight made even the pebbles sparkle like golden ore. Kuji got off the ferry and was greeted by the overpowering scent of summer grass.

The island had a population of about one hundred and fifty, most of them elderly. The woman who showed Kuji his way was also nearing ninety, and repeatedly told him how thankful they were.

"After all, it's hard work just to arrange to take a boat to the nearest island with a church," she said. Although their church did not look like much of one, they said they would work together to have a proper building built someday.

"We don't even have an organ," the old woman said. "But we are definitely planning to buy one."

The people of the Goto Islands had been buffeted by a turbulent history which was contrary to the mild climate, and it was this environment in which they continued to develop a deep connection with religion.

Eventually, a small building appeared - a *kuri*, which usually functioned as a living quarters for a Buddhist temple. Tall grasses grew thickly even in front of the entrance, and a man in work clothes crouched as he cut the grass.

Kuji approached and saw that the man was wearing sunglasses. He grasped at each handful of grass and cut it with a sickle. There was a white cane at his feet. Although Kuji was tempted to talk to the man right away, he didn't want to startle him and make him hurt himself. Kuji waited until the man put the sickle down on the ground. Eventually, the man exchanged his sickle for his cane and stood up slowly to turn his face towards Kuji.

"Why did you do this?" Kuji burst out. At a loss for his next words, Kuji burst into tears. He stood there and wept for what must have been about fifteen minutes. In the end, he finally stopped when he almost heaved from crying too much.

Song reached out to pat Kuji's shoulder gently. "Are you all right now? You're still like a child, Masatake."

"Why did you do this?" Kuji asked again hoarsely.

"Masatake, I told you that I didn't have anything left to give to you, but I did. That was why."

"But that's..."

While Kuji was waiting to receive his transplant, he had asked his sister to look up what the transplant process was like.

"Your eyes..." Kuji trailed off as a finger was pressed to his lips.

"From dust we came, and to dust we'll return. But for that short time until I return to dust, I figured God would allow me to lend you my eyes."

Kuji sniffled as he squeezed Song's hand. It was warm and exactly the same as he remembered when he first held it. He felt more tears stream down his face - but this time, they were tears of joy.

"Starting tomorrow, I'll cut the grass instead."

"I'll be counting on you, Masatake."

And someday, when the church gets an organ, I'll play again. He already had his heart set on which song he would play first. *That song, of course,* he thought to himself.

THE END